

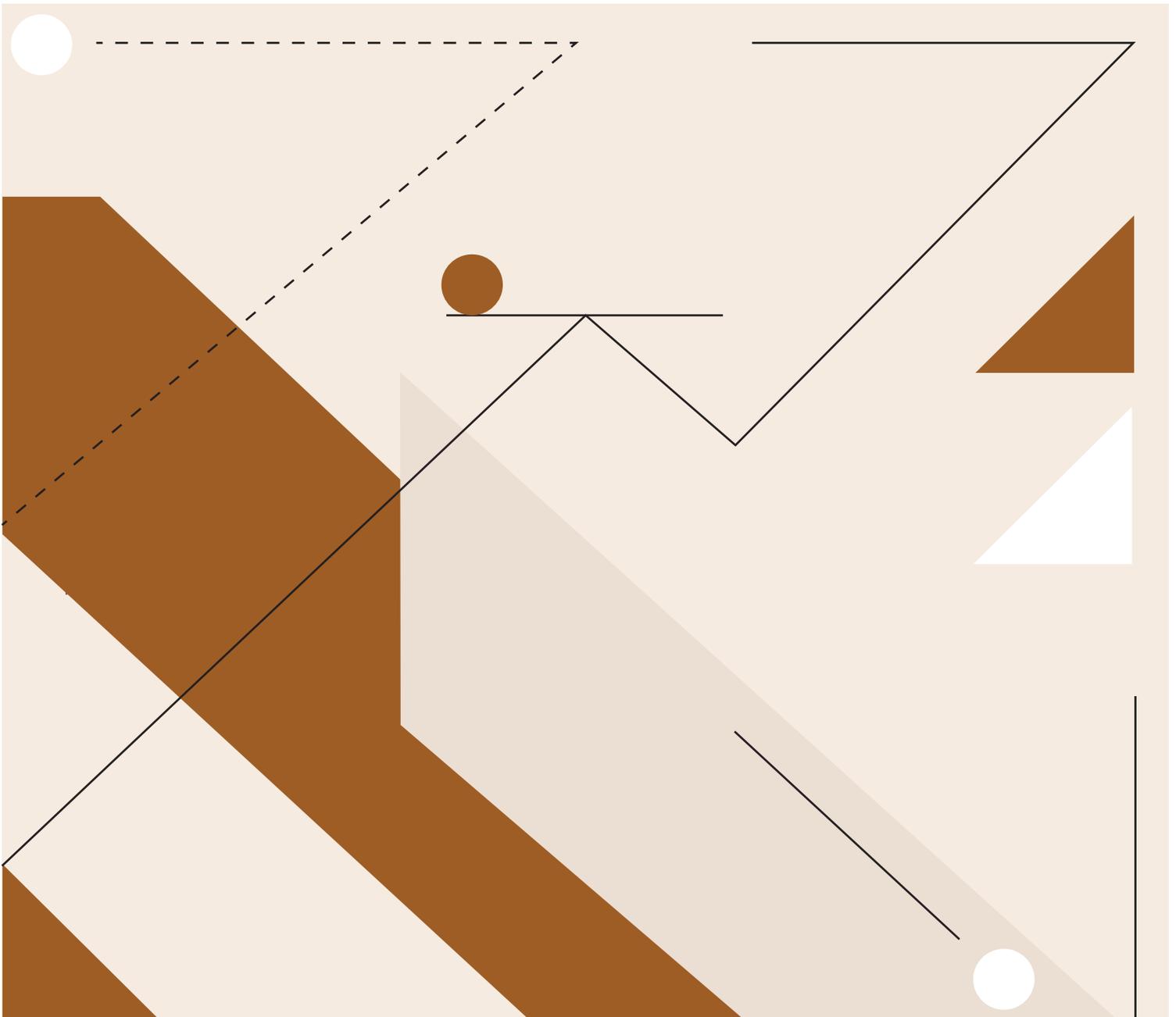


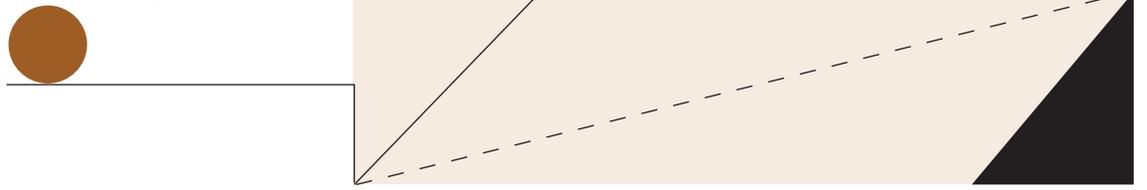
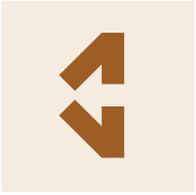
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STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE: A TOOL FOR EMANCIPATORY POLITICS

Dr. Alex Bryan,
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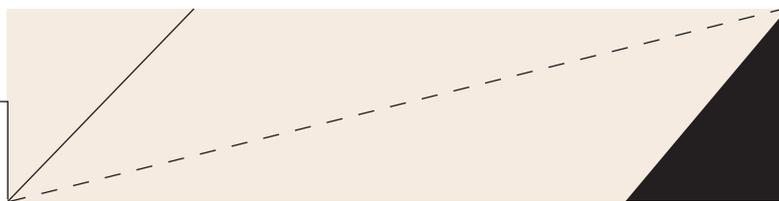




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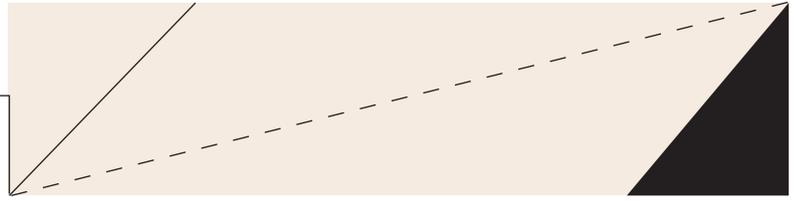
Alex Bryan¹

Despite their many important differences, global poverty (Ashford, 2013), migrant domestic labour (Aragon & Jagger, 2018), and insufficient access to basic goods (Young, 2011) are all evidently cases of injustice. In each case individuals suffer due to a lack of goods and opportunity, and are vulnerable to a wide range of further evils, such as exploitation, disease, and physical violence. But what kind of injustice is involved in these cases? Phenomena of this kind, that are so complex and disparate, cannot be meaningfully understood as the result of the actions of any particular agent or group. Nor can we pinpoint a single structure or system, even at the global level, that is liable.

One influential way of characterising cases of this kind in the recent philosophical literature has been through the concept of structural injustice. As articulated in the work of political philosopher Iris Marion Young, structural injustices are cases of injustice that are neither purely interactional (such as stealing sweets from a child) nor limited to the rules or policies of any particular institution (Aragon & Jagger, 2018). Whereas a purely interactional approach might focus on the intentions or moral culpability of particular agents, a structural approach to injustice points to the way in which unjust situations or practices can be the product of the unintended consequences of other social phenomena or structures. Structural injustices instead emerge from the normal operation of social practices and norms that systematically result in a group of people being placed in a social position that makes them vulnerable to certain threats.

The concept of structural injustice not only enables those engaged in progressive political action to better understand or diagnose some of the most widespread and egregious injustices in the world today, but also provides the basis for a discussion of what kinds of obligations the large number of people who contribute to these injustices in some way have to those who suffer these injustices.

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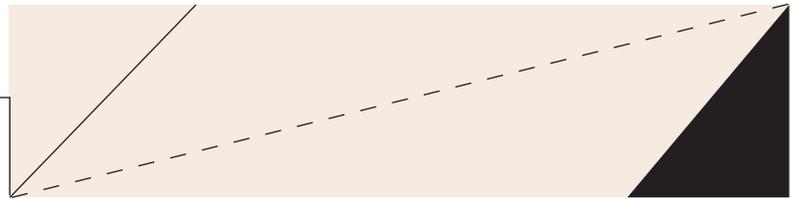
The collective and individual acts that have received the most attention in the philosophical literature can be the starting point for political actors and policy-makers to consider how to achieve popular support to this end, and to how to incorporate the importance of these obligations into a wider political message.

I will begin by setting out the distinctive conceptual features of structural injustice in more detail, before moving on to set out some of recent philosophical literature that connects structural injustice to related policy and philosophical issues. I then consider how to respond to and resist structural injustices. In the final section I explore how the concept of structural injustice can aid emancipatory political struggle and practice.

1. What is Structural Injustice?

The examples of structural injustice listed at the beginning of this article all take place on a global scale, involving the separate actions of millions of people acting in ways that are not necessarily morally blameworthy. While the capacity of the concept of structural injustice to point us towards these cases and to identify the specific kind of wrong at play is deeply valuable, structural injustices can also be local or more constrained. In her final posthumously published book *Responsibility for Justice*, Young introduces structural injustice with a case of housing in the United States. She describes the case of a single mother - Sandy - who is forced to leave her city-centre apartment as the building is sold to property developers. Having discovered that the only apartments she can afford are far from her work and her child's school, she buys a car to make the commute possible. Upon seeking to purchase a low-quality flat, she discovers that the real estate agent, as is standard practice, requires three month's rent as a downpayment. Having purchased the car, Sandy is unable to make this payment, and she and her child end up homeless, sleeping in the car.

As Young details, the injustice that Sandy suffers is evident but not easy to define. We cannot attribute her suffering to any particular agent or malign decision; after all, the property developer might argue that their decision to purchase the building was a business necessity, and the agent might note that the demand for three month's rent is a product of the market as a whole rather than their particular wishes.

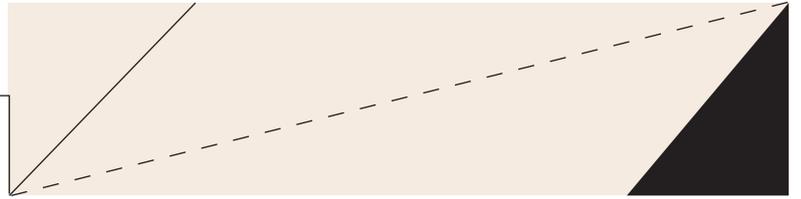


The structural injustice she suffers is instead, using Young's term, a very 'ordinary' kind of injustice, emerging out of a range of unremarkable social practices and processes that put some groups of people in a position where they are vulnerable to the threat of homelessness or insecurity while enabling others to flourish (Young, 2011, 52).

These include, in this case: housing and municipal policy (both present and historical, perhaps dating back for decades or even centuries); the distribution of wealth and resources; the availability of credit; the rules of the property regime; the distribution of opportunities for education and career advancement; low wages; and much more.

The consequence of the operation of all of these processes is that certain groups of people are placed in a position where they are vulnerable to the kinds of threats that Sandy suffers - displacement, precarity, poverty, and homelessness. These people have the option of affordable, convenient, liveable housing taken away from them. These constraints and vulnerabilities are not the result of a choice that Sandy has made, but of her social position. She, like an array of city-dwellers, is vulnerable to displacement through property development because of her relative lack of wealth and dependence on public transport. But her social position is not explicable only in terms of her housing situation but is also based on some of the most important structural norms in modern societies. As a woman, she is not only disadvantaged in the labour market but is subject to gender norms that lead to her acting as the primary caregiver to her child, exacerbating her vulnerability.

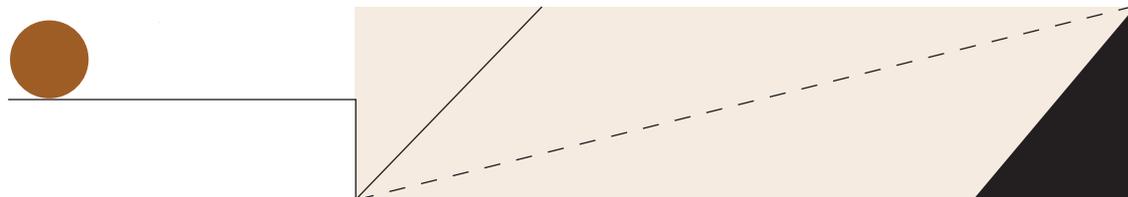
Structural injustices, then, are those injustices that are not purely interactional or institutional, but the produce of wide-ranging sets of action by many agents, guided by social norms and practices. We can understand structural injustices in this way without overshadowing or erasing the role of intentional action in the cultivation of the background conditions and institutional norms and rules through which these injustices are enacted. For instance, the global phenomenon of domestic migrant labour - in which millions of people, primarily women, from countries in the Global South find work as domestic labourers in other countries, most commonly in the West and the Middle East - is a case of structural injustice and beyond the control of any individual or state.



We can identify it as such while also noting that the background historical and economic conditions that lead women in these countries to move abroad, and which facilitate demand (of a certain kind) for female domestic workers in other parts of the world, include forms of oppression and domination that are more straightforwardly intentional and interactional.

Structural injustices, like all others, take place in the context of colonial exploitation, political domination, and so on. Labelling something as a structural injustice indicates that it is not the product of any single act or agent; that the conditions of the injustice are being recreated and re-affirmed constantly, by actors at various degrees of removal all around the world. Some philosophers have regarded Young's reluctance to incorporate liability into her model of structural injustice as a weakness, and have introduced additional layers of responsibility - such as 'structural complicity' - designed to indicate the greater involvement of some agents in the creation of these injustices than others (Aragon & Jagger, 2018; Ashford, 2013; Lu, 2017). Whether or not one accepts these revisions, it is clear that all cases of structural injustice will involve large numbers of people who cannot meaningfully be described as liable or complicit, but who nonetheless hold political responsibility. For instance, whether or not we regard the executives or shareholders of multinational energy companies as liable for the injustices associated with the extraction of fossil fuels and the environmental consequences of their use for energy, the vast numbers of people who consume fossil fuels can be identified as having a political responsibility to remedy these injustices even though they cannot meaningfully be viewed as liable or complicit in their production.

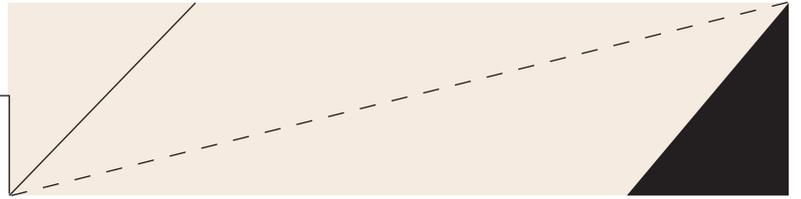
As such, structural injustices cannot be remedied or controlled by any one actor or individual. Nor is participation in the creation or reproduction of a structural injustice a form of wrongdoing. As Young (2011, 73) writes, '[i]t is possible, and indeed even likely, that some people can rightly claim that their individual interactions with others are impeccable, and at the same time they contribute a great deal to the production and reproduction of structural injustice'. Sandy, the real estate agent, the landlord, the municipal and state authorities and all other agents associated in the case outlined above need not be doing anything wrong for the structural injustice to emerge (Powers & Faden, 2019, 113-4).



If no one can be held liable, or morally responsible, for these injustices, though, we might reasonably ask how they could possibly be rectified. One of the distinctive features of structural injustice on Young's account is that - naturally enough, considering that often all associated actors will have acted in morally permissible ways - it does not focus on the assignation of blame. Attending to cases of structural injustice instead requires a 'forward-looking' approach in which individuals who participate in institutions and practices that create or reproduce these injustices are identified as holding not a moral but a political responsibility to address those injustices. Understanding what obligations we might have as a result of this responsibility, and how to discharge them, has political as well as philosophical implications.

2. Economic and Epistemic Structural Injustice

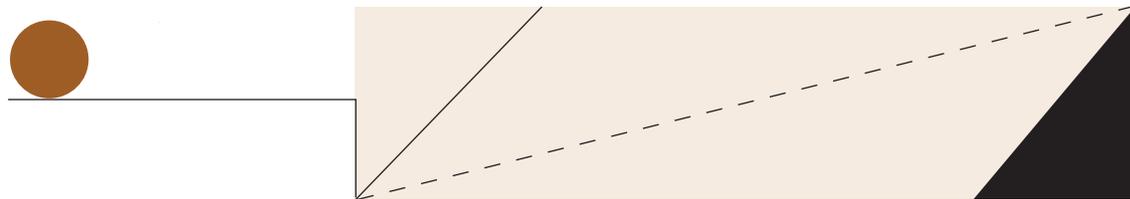
In order to elucidate the concept of structural injustice more clearly, we can consider two ways in it has been applied within the recent philosophical literature to prominent political cases. As indicated above, the global economy is a complex case that can be understood both as a form of structural injustice itself (ref) and as made up by a number of particular structural injustices. For instance, as Lisa Herzog (2019) has argued, the role of global reserve currencies as part of the background conditions of global financial capitalism functions to systematically advantage some over others. Specifically, the fact that these reserve currencies also function as national currencies means that the global financial system contains biases towards those countries which control and use them; we can particularly identify this, Herzog notes, when debtor countries are forced to repay loans in US Dollars or Euros. Other countries are dependent on the decisions of the institutions that organise and manage these dominant currencies (i.e the US Federal Reserve and Treasury department, the European Central Bank); what is more, it is those countries which have been most acutely disadvantaged within the global economy more broadly that are most vulnerable to these decisions, as it is developing countries which typically hold higher rates of reserves (Herzog, 2016). Responding to this injustice might require reforming the basic structure of international finance and trade, either by establishing more robust international institutions to ensure that the background conditions do not contain these biases.



The concept of structural injustice also overlaps with the concept of structural domination. Within republican political thought, structural domination involves the subjection of individuals or groups to the arbitrary - that is, the uncontrolled - power of others (Gourevitch, 2013; Cicerchia, 2019). A paradigmatic form of structural domination is the labour market, as workers are subject to the arbitrary power of capitalists within the workplace, in the text of the labour contract, and when unemployed. The concepts of structural injustice and structural domination are intertwined, though they have separate conceptual roots. Instances of structural domination, for instance, will often also be cases of structural injustice, in which the vulnerability of the systematically disadvantaged group is to the power of others; in addition to workers in the labour market, we can see this in the arbitrary power to which women are subject within sexist societies by virtue of the distributive and epistemic injustices to which they are subject (Bohman, 2012). Indeed, Herzog (2019, 5) argues that 'reserve currencies can contribute to domination if countries are put in a situation in which their self-determination is compromised. This can happen, in particular, if a country without a reserve currency is also dominated in other respects (e.g. because it depends on trading relations with other countries for essential goods), creating a cumulative effect'.

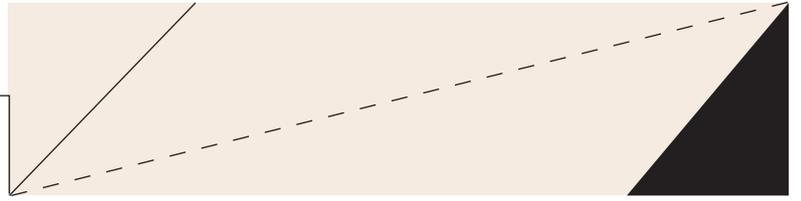
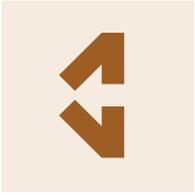
3. Resisting Structural Injustice

Those who contribute in some small way to the production and reproduction of structural injustices - that is to say, almost all of us to varying degrees - have responsibilities to try and remedy these injustices. There are two approaches to doing so that are especially prominent in popular discourse that, for Young at least, do not effectively discharge these responsibilities. In the first, individuals may seek to discharge their obligations by ensuring that their interactions with others, especially victims of structural injustice, are morally fair and laudable. For instance, a Westerner may resolve to treat the migrant domestic worker they employ well, and perhaps even to go out of their way to improve her conditions. In the second, individuals may simply seek to keep their hands clean by opting out of any association with practices that produce these injustices, perhaps by growing one's own food, refraining from purchasing clothes from certain brands associated with sweatshop labour, and so on. Neither of these is sufficient: as the injustice is structural rather than interpersonal, it is not open to correction through interpersonal means; and one's implication in these injustices is often unavoidable, and a legacy of past benefits gained (Aragon & Jagger, 2018, 453).



Instead, our responsibility is to reform the institutions and structures that produce these systemic injustices. How we go about trying to do this is to a large degree up to us, and will involve comparative judgements of the efficacy of different options, but Young argues that it is only collective action that can effectively produce these results: '[w]e share responsibility to organize means of changing how the processes work so they will issue in less injustice'. In contrast to individualist approaches, of the kind discussed in the previous paragraph, collective action will seek to use existing institutions - most notably the state - to take action that address these injustices in various ways. This could include a range of measures from political campaigning and activism directed at state or international institutions, to supporting NGOs and charities that work to benefit those affected by this injustice.

One might worry that identifying things like global poverty and migrant domestic labour in terms of structural injustice might induce a sense of fatalism among those of us in the Global North regarding our capacity to resolve them. Without the moral motivation that comes with the attribution of blame or liability, will individuals be sufficiently motivated to engage with institutions that can improve the situation? Young thinks that avoiding accusations of blame can in fact help to motivate us to act by avoiding the defensiveness that individuals often respond to such accusations with (Young, 2003, 16). This defensiveness can itself be a major obstacle to structural change, as individuals feel under attack or regard the accusation that they are directly liable as misplaced (a point starkly illustrated in recent discussions of sexism in the public sphere, in which this defensiveness has derailed the possibility of serious reflection on gender norms and expectations). Shifting away from the blame paradigm may avoid these difficulties, shifting focus onto how structural injustices can be tackled instead.

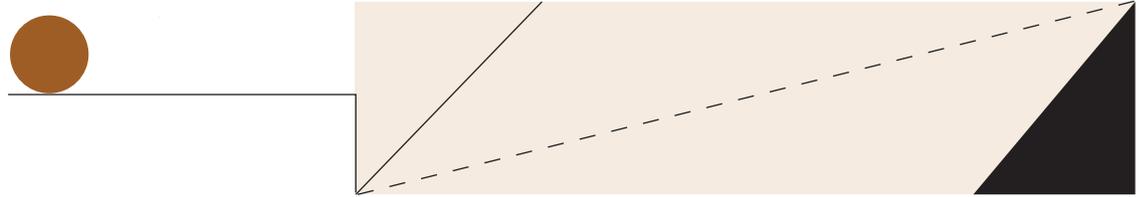
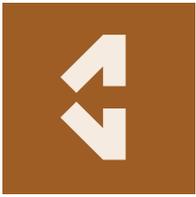


4. Structural Injustice and Emancipatory Politics

The concept of structural injustice can be useful for those engaged in emancipatory politics in a number of ways. One is that it helps us to understand some of the most urgent cases of injustice on a global scale that might otherwise be viewed as cases of oppression or mere institutional injustice, thus providing a more effective basis for addressing them. Additionally, the role of collective action in resisting structural injustices demonstrates one way in which collectivism can continue to be a critical political force in an age of global capitalism and inequality and increasing individualisation.

The means by which we might do this are naturally coherent with radical progressive politics. One dimension of this is that, as Young argues, it is that those who are vulnerable to suffering structural injustices who are best placed to lead institutional efforts to fight them because of their strong interest in the success of those efforts and their insight into the possible effects and unintended consequences of various policies and reforms. Indeed, these individuals may have a responsibility to oppose these injustices in some ways (Jugov & Ypi, 2019). Another is the primacy of collective action as a means of transforming society to end structural injustice. In a highly individualistic social and economic context, the promise of collective action as a way of minimising these structural injustices – reducing global poverty, transforming the social and economic drivers of migrant domestic labour, ensuring that affordable and decent housing is available to all – is not only worth pursuing in itself but can show the merits of collectivist approaches more generally.

The concept of structural injustice provides a way of thinking about many of the most pressing forms of injustice in modern societies that can be useful for the promotion of radical politics. By conceiving injustices such as housing shortages, global poverty, and migrant domestic labour as structural in character, it demonstrates that these are not problems that can be solved merely through more enlightened policy-making or charity. Rather, they require the transformation of a global economic order that systematically disadvantages particular groups of people. Combining this critical analysis of global injustice with a prescription for collective action as a means of remedying that injustice, the conceptual apparatus of structural injustice marries traditional leftist means with a nuanced and innovative conceptual apparatus that can help to advance our understanding of the obstacles to be overcome.



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