

Systemic and Structural Injustice: Is There a Difference?*

SALLY HASLANGER

Abstract

The terms ‘structural injustice’ and ‘systemic injustice’ are commonly used, but their meanings are elusive. In this paper, I sketch an ontology of social systems that embeds accounts of social structures, relations, and practices. On this view, structures may be intrinsically problematic, or they may be problematic only insofar as they interact with other structures in the system to produce injustice. Because social practices that constitute structures set the backdrop for agency and identity, socially fluent agents reproduce the systems, often unknowingly and unintentionally. The account aims to capture how agents both depend on and enact structures, and do so in ways that, as Ta-Nehisi Coates says, ‘land on the body’.

1. Introduction

In 1963, after the bombing at the 16th St. Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama that killed four girls (Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair, and Carole Robertson), Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a eulogy for the ‘young victims’.¹ One passage reads:

They are the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity. And so this afternoon in a real sense they have something to say to each of us in their death....They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers. (King 1963/2013)

King is not just focused here on the tragedy of the girls’ deaths and the legitimate rage at the perpetrator, but is calling upon the grieving,

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¹ The eulogy occurred the funeral of Addie Mae Collins, Carol Denise McNair, and Cynthia Diane Wesley. A separate service was held for the fourth victim, Carole Robertson. See: <https://mlkscholars.mit.edu/updates/2015/invoking-dr-king>. Thanks to Chike Jeffers for urging me to clarify this.

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and on us, to understand the incident as part of a system, a way of life, a 'philosophy'. Such tragedies – big and small – continue to occur, not just because there are bad actors in the world, but because contemporary societies are part of a global system of White Supremacy.

In response to King, one can be concerned with the system, experience it, and fight it, from different perspectives and different social positions. I want to know, what is this 'system'? What sustains it? How does it recruit perpetrators to enact it? How does it train people to ignore it? Why is it so durable, so intractable? Ta-Nehisi Coates insists that while trying to answer these questions we must keep in mind the system's material impact, its brutality.

But all our phrasing – race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy – serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body. (Coates, 2015, p. 10)

King and Coates, together, call for an inquiry into how systemic racism and its way of life 'land on the body'. We are all part of the system because White Supremacy, like all social systems, is constituted (in part) by individuals. We embody it, willingly or unwillingly. Can we gain a better understanding of how?

In the first several sections of the paper I will sketch an account of society as a complex dynamic system with a structure – a network of social relations – that emerges through the coordinating function of social practices. In doing so, I'll also briefly go over my account of social practices and, in response to King, explain how power and injustice can be structural and become systemic.² I will then turn to the issue of how structural racism 'lands on the body' by considering how individuals who are fluent in practices take on identities that shape their subjectivity and embodiment, and in some contexts, are

² I am not sure that the term 'injustice' is right for the subject of this paper, for it can be used in a rather narrow sense. The term 'oppression' is sometimes offered as an alternative that both includes 'group-based' injustices and social injustices that go beyond (narrowly construed) political wrongs. Rather than get into these issues in this paper, I will use the term 'injustice' because it is common in debates over structural wrongs. But I mean it in a very broad sense that should include oppression as one form.

enlisted in defending the system. Such defense can become coercive and violent, as Coates insists, and we must not only remember this, but include it in our theorizing.

2. Complex Systems and Structures

a. Structures

On the kind of account I favor, a system, broadly construed, is a set of things working together in a way that forms a whole. There are different kinds of systems and different ways to think of the relationship between systems and structures. I find it useful to think of systems as historically particular, concrete, dynamic processes; structures are the networks of relations that hold between the parts.³ Stewart Shapiro suggests:

I define a system to be a collection of objects with certain relations. An extended family is a system of people with blood and marital relationships, a chess configuration is a system of pieces under spatial and ‘possible move’ relationships...A structure is the abstract form of a system, highlighting the interrelationships among the objects, and ignoring any features of them that do not affect how they relate to other objects in the system. (1997, p. 73)

I take Shapiro to be suggesting, for example, that *my family* is a system that includes particular individuals (Steve, Isaac, Zina, Sparky, me) who stand in relations such as ‘parent of,’ ‘child of,’ ‘spouse of,’ ‘sibling of,’ ‘dog of,’ etc. Although Shapiro’s quote does not capture the dynamic aspect of systems, any family system is dynamic and changes over time, e.g., as family members age.⁴ This particular Yablanger system is unique in the sense that no other (immediate) family is defined by the five of us; but it instantiates a more general structure shared by other families. In a structure,

³ This allows that we can identify both system-tokens and system-types. System types, however, are distinct from structures, because a structure is defined entirely in terms of the relations in the network. For something to be the same type of system, it has to ‘work’ in the same way. For something to have the same structure is for it to instantiate the same set of (selected) relations. Thanks to Jonathan Ichikawa for pressing me on this point. See also Haslanger (2016).

⁴ To be clear, my children are not ‘children’ anymore. They are children in the kinship relation sense, but they are adults. Also, sadly, Sparky died in 2022.

we can distinguish the individual in the system (me), from the position within the structure (parent, spouse). That is, considering places – or what are sometimes called *positions* or *nodes* – as objects, we ignore the particular individuals that occupy the places, and focus on the relationships that hold between places. The child-parent relation occurs in many different forms across culture, history, class, etc. My relations to my children are token instances of it. These token relations differ in many ways from how other parents are related to their children in my social milieu and differ even more from child-parent relations in other societies. But it is still meaningful to say that they are examples of the child-parent relation. Relations, structures, and systems can be described at different levels of generality, though when I speak of a system, I will have in mind the historical token, unless otherwise indicated.

To claim, as Shapiro does, that a structure ‘is the abstract form of’ a system may suggest that structures are virtual, immaterial, or ideational;⁵ it might also seem that, as such, they are not causally efficacious.⁶ But this is a misunderstanding. We should ask (i) are structures only ‘in the mind,’ e.g., are they ideas or representations? And (ii) if not, are they the kind of abstract entities that have no causal impact on the world?

There are two moves in identifying a structure. The first is to shift attention from individuals to relations; the second is to recognize that the same relation can be instantiated by different individuals. Consider first the move to relations: relations are not mere abstractions that we create by imagining concrete individuals without full detail. (Although, as we saw above, we can consider relations at different levels of generality, the relation itself is not an artifact of our imagination.) For example, in order for a house to stand, the roof rests on load bearing walls that transfer the weight of the roof to the foundation. A token relation, such as my shed’s roof *resting*

⁵ Giddens, among many others, falls for this temptation (Giddens, 1986, p. 17); Sewell challenges it (Sewell, 1992, p. 6).

⁶ The ontological distinction between abstract and concrete objects does not presuppose that abstract objects are the product of (cognitive) abstraction; in fact, there is a longstanding debate in philosophy about the nature of abstract objects. The argument I am making here is addressed to those who assume that ‘abstract objects’ are either a product of cognition or not in causal contact with the material world. If one already grants that ‘abstract objects’ can be causally efficacious parts of the world, then the point I am making here is not news. But I will try to avoid using the term ‘abstract’ because of its tendency to evoke anti-realist or ideational understandings of structure.

on those particular walls, is causally responsible for the shed remaining upright. This enabled the windows and door to be constructed without risking a roof collapse. And, more generally, if a roof stands in the relation-type *rests on* to some set of load bearing walls, it will typically have the same effect; different objects can stand in the places or nodes of that relation. Because building construction depends on roofs remaining on walls, materials are manufactured in order to facilitate and sustain the physical relation: beam brackets, joist hangers, straps and ties, nail plates, fasteners, and such. The relation *rests on* is a physical relation – it connects different parts of the physical world – not just an idea or representation.⁷ And although the relation is not just another bit of matter added to the walls and roof, relations are part of what make up physical structures, such as buildings, and they have a causal impact.⁸ So relations are not all just in the mind, and they are not the sort of abstract thing that exists apart from the natural world. Although I have chosen an artifact to make the point, the world includes relations and structures that are the subject matter of natural science (Garfinkel, 1981).

Likewise, social relations are not mere ideational abstractions, nor are they casually removed from the world in a realm of abstracta. My family is a particular system that instantiates parent, spouse, pet, and sibling relations. The parent-child relation is part of its structure. Consider, for example, the relation of *legal parent*. This relation constrains and enables what actions the parent can legally perform and their rights and responsibilities for a minor child. For example, a legal parent has the right to make medical decisions for the child: my signature on a consent form for my child has a different meaning and a different effect than the signature of a stranger. The relation *is the legal parent of*, unlike the *rests on* relation, may

⁷ Elder-Vass argues that relations are not, as such, causally efficacious because ‘relations only have a causal impact when combined with the things that they relate. Causal efficacy is a product of the parts and the relations combined’ (2010, p. 23). I find this confusing. We can allow that it is *the roof’s resting on the walls* that causes the house to stay upright. But if we ask, why do the walls stay vertical and the roof horizontal (rather than both falling), it is because of the relation between them. It plays no explanatory role if it isn’t instantiated, but that is no reason to say that the relation between them isn’t causally efficacious.

⁸ The background ontology I’m relying on is a form of hylomorphism: matter alone is not sufficient to explain the workings of the world, form also matters. The pile of boards, nails, beam brackets and such don’t make a house; they must stand in certain relations to each other to do so. See Aristotle *Physics* II, in Barnes (1984).

depend on conventions. But it is not created simply by abstracting from the parent and a child. It sets background conditions on and affects what forms of parental agency are possible. Like a load bearing wall, it helps to hold up a family.

Because parents have certain rights and responsibilities with respect their minor children – this comes with the position in the structure – I have those rights and responsibilities with respect to my children. Like Shapiro, I take the nodes in a structure to be occupied by individuals. Depending on one's account of causation, a structure may be directly or indirectly causal, or it may affect causal powers.⁹ But the structure (or the relations that constitute it) can also *constitute* a social position. Consider the rook in chess: it can be any random object, but its status as rook is defined by a set of permissible move relationships. These are not causal relations. In a particular game (thinking of it as a process or extended event), the chosen object occupies a space on the board and its options are set by the current placement of the other pieces and what rook moves are allowed. Analogously (though over-simplified), as a parent, I have certain rights and responsibilities – think of these as the possible and obligatory moves available to me, like the moves available to rooks. In a particular dynamic system (my family), I occupy a particular space in relation to others, and the moves available to me at any time depend on the details of my particular relationships to them, the rights and responsibilities I have as a parent, spouse, etc., and the multiple other physical and social factors that constrain my choice.

Games, such as chess, are often helpful examples for understanding the social domain, but the analogy is limited. In particular, we should not limit ourselves to rules that constrain and enable the 'moves' in social space. Choice architectures for individuals at nodes in a structure are conditioned by multiple factors: physical, geographical, biological, economic, political, legal, cultural, and semiotic, to name a few (Sewell, 2005, p. 44) and improvisation is central to navigating them (Bertinetto and Bertram, 2020). And just as a chess player has autonomy in how to move their rook between options compatible with the rules of chess, I have autonomy what choices I make, given my options. I may make choices that are morally permissible or impermissible, good or bad. But notice that *being a parent*, like *being a rook*, also makes some options possible,

⁹ Note that it may be relevant to distinguish what Dretske (1988) has called 'triggering' causes and 'structuring' causes. I discuss this in Haslanger (2016).

and others impossible, due to the position in the structure. In short, structures are networks of relations instantiated in different systems. Social structures are, in a sense, the form of social systems, the skeleton that connects different individuals and practices in a social body.

b. Systems

Societies are complex dynamic systems, as are hearts, brains, ant hills, weather systems, economies, and ecosystems. Aspects of a system (physical or social) may be represented in a static model, e.g., a genealogical tree may represent a structure of kinship relations. But the relations that form the structure of a dynamic system constrain and enable action and evolve over time. How do they do so? Before answering this with the specifics of social systems, it is important to note some differences between simple systems and complex system.

A *simple system* (very roughly) is one in which the behaviors of the whole can be explained or predicted by reference a sequence of regular (linear) operations on its parts (Simon, 1962; Bechtel, 2011). Examples of simple systems include thermostats, clocks, calculators, printers. *Complex systems*, in contrast, are not straightforwardly decomposable into independent parts, the operations of the parts are not necessarily linear, and they are self-organizing and stable due to feedback loops (Ladyman et al, 2013). Complex systems can appear chaotic because the interactions between the parts are non-linear and unpredictable. But nevertheless, the whole displays patterns and regularities.

To make progress in understanding complexity, let's start with a simple example. Following Murray (1994), imagine a drunk leaving a bar and taking a walk. Let's also imagine a dog has slipped its leash and is taking a walk in the same neighborhood. Each path may seem utterly random – the dog is distracted by every smell, the drunk is wandering, befuddled. However, let's suppose that the dog belongs to the drunk. The dog doesn't want to get too far from the drunk, and the drunk doesn't want to get too far from the dog. When the dog barks, the drunk moves closer to the sound; when the drunk calls out, the dog adjusts its movements towards her. The relationship between the dog and the drunk is not fixed – the dog is not on a leash – but they are probabilistically correlated.

The example illustrates several things. First, in some cases, apparent randomness in the behavior of an individual entity is revealed as not random once we find it to be part of a whole. This does not mean,

however, that the behavior becomes completely predictable. Second, the behavior of each individual is explained (in part) by their relation to each other, i.e. to their being interdependent parts of a whole (the pair). In the case of the drunk and her dog, the two 'corrected' their paths to approach each other. If the dog was afraid of the drunk, and ran away from her calls, or if there were a third participant, e.g., the drunk's friend, there would be a different correlation between and different potential explanations of their paths (who is following whom?), and there might still be a degree of integration between some or all of them (Smith and Harrison, 1995). However, if the friend was following the drunk, but was oblivious to the dog, the dog/friend paths would not be integrated. What matters for integration is the tight dispositional responsiveness to the behavior of the other part(s).

Now suppose that we are considering multiple kinds of entities whose behavior is linked and cross-linked in a way similar to the drunk and her dog. In other words, there are many different entities interacting in densely connected networks, possibly networks that cross levels and loop back on each other. There comes a point when the behavior of items in the networks is no longer linear, e.g., the change of the output in the paths of the drunk and the dog are not proportional to the change in the input. Heuristically, the *system* becomes an apt object of analysis when the behavior of an entity is better explained by seeing it as an interdependent part of a whole (the system) than by considering it individually, e.g., when the parts are co-integrated.¹⁰

Understanding societies as complex systems is important for the argument of this paper for three reasons. First, complex systems are self-organizing and exhibit dynamic homeostasis. They maintain themselves without central authority. As a result, they are difficult to disrupt, but because they are not linear, small changes can cascade and have a big effect. Moreover, a complex system can evolve (or 'learn') as conditions change; unlike a simple system, it is not stuck in a fixed routine. Second, the workings of a complex system cannot be explained by decomposing it into its parts and

¹⁰ For example, the paths of the drunk, her dog, and the friend, might also be affected by the local traffic, the geography, the weather, as well as the participants' levels of drunkenness, bodily fatigue, etc. Assuming the weather and geography are not responsive to the behavior of the drunk and her dog (they are not co-integrated), they count as the environment of the system, rather than as parts of the system. Information from the environment can affect the system without being part of it.

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tracing how they interact, i.e., mechanistically (Bechtel and Richardson, 1993). Third, in complex systems, the structure and environment of the system can impose constraints on the components in a way that shapes them over time to fit the structure. This is common in evolutionary systems and other forms of adaptive systems.. For this (and other) reasons, many reject the idea of ‘levels’ of reality as causally encapsulated (e.g., Wimsatt, 1994; Potochnik and McGill, 2012; Potochnik, 2021).

How does this bear on understanding complex *social* systems? Societies are not planned and implemented by anyone. They are self-organizing systems. Although legislatures, economists, planning boards, and policy makers undertake to construct and intervene in social systems, and what they do matters, they are not in control. The society, so to speak, has a life of its own, and much of what happens is not designed or intended by anyone. One consequence of this is that well-informed and morally motivated interventions can have unpredictable and often inimical effects. But we must also be sensitive to the fact that agents in a social system are shaped by it – we come to ‘fit’ niches in the structure by, among other things, internalizing the relevant norms for the positions we occupy – and coordination on available terms is imperative.¹¹ This can make it difficult to even imagine intervening in a way that disrupts the system and it limits our options for escaping it.¹²

On the approach I have developed elsewhere, social relations – the relations that form the structure of a system – emerge and are enacted in social practices. Roughly, social practices are patterns of learned behavior, but need not be guided by rules or performed intentionally; they also allow for improvisation (Haslanger, 2018). However, they are not mere regularities in behavior, either, for they are the product of social learning and evolve through responsiveness both

¹¹ In the critical theory tradition, this process of producing a social subject capable of legible agency is sometimes referred to as *subjectivation*, or *subjection* (Lepold, 2018; Smith, 2016). Much of this work draws substantially on Althusser’s idea of *interpellation*. See Haslanger (2018; 2019b; 2021).

¹² Although Young’s discussion of the five faces of oppression doesn’t emphasize this, it is common to think of oppressive systems as ones that ‘lock us in’ and are difficult to escape, e.g., Frye’s birdcage (1983), Payton (2022). Although I won’t explicitly discuss this aspect of oppression in this paper, it fits well with the idea of injustice being embedded in a complex system.

to each other's performances and the parts of the world we have an interest in collectively managing.¹³ Our responsiveness is mediated by social meanings and signaling mechanisms that enable members of the group to communicate, coordinate, and manage the things taken to have value.¹⁴ This will create loops: culture provides tools to interpret some part of the world as valuable (or not) – as a resource – and offers guidance for how to properly interact with it. In turn, our interaction with a resource affects it: we grow it, shape it, manage it, distribute it, dispose of it, etc. And how it responds to our actions affects our ongoing interactions with it. In cases where a practice takes hold, we shape ourselves and the resource in order to facilitate the ongoing practice.

On this account, practices regularize our behavior in response to each other and the world so that we can effectively communicate and coordinate. Such practices establish relations between people who occupy positions in the practice. Some of these relations are formal: they are constituted within institutions and come with relatively precise job descriptions for those positioned in the structure. But social relations formed in practices are not all institutional; so it would be wrong to identify structural injustice with institutional injustice. Moreover, what position one occupies is not necessarily a matter of choice, for the social meanings available in a culture may mark and assign individuals with a body like yours, or parents like yours, or skills like yours, to particular position in the practice(s), like it or not (O'Connor, 2019), and individuals are shaped to take up these practices willingly and find them valuable (Haslanger, 2019a; 2019b). Any society will involve many different kinds of practices, and the social relations will grow into networks or structures. We cannot assume, however, that the networks of relations are neatly ordered and coherent. Rather, any society structured by a variety of such networks of relations will exhibit complexity, as well as some degree of fragmentation and dysfunction. Such fragmentation is both a blessing and a curse, for, as the saying goes, the cracks are where the light gets in.

¹³ The idea that social learning is constitutive of the social domain is central to work in cultural evolution and animal studies. See, e.g., Sterelny (2012) and Andrews (2020). On the sensitivity of social practices to material conditions, see also Kukla and Lance (2014).

¹⁴ This is not limited to human animals. Non-human animals also engage in social practices and societies with social structures. See, e.g., Haslanger (2019a) and Andrews (2020).

4. Structured Coordination

a. Coordination and Categories

Cailin O'Connor (2019) provides some insight into how self-sustaining unjust systems emerge.¹⁵ She asks: what are the minimal conditions under which social inequality would emerge and be stable? On her view, a central set of coordination problems are best understood as *complementary* problems: rather than coming up with a solution that has us all do the same thing (drive on the right), the solution requires us to act differently, but in sync, such as ballroom dancing ('step forward if you are a woman and back if you are a man' (2019, p. 39)). Complementary problems are solved by establishing roles that are suitably related. But we need more than roles, for we need methods, such as social markers and social categories, to identify who functions in what role (2019, pp. 38-39). In some cases, we may create specific role-related categories to solve a new coordination problem, e.g., wage laborer/professional; but it is useful to rely on the same categories across tasks, e.g., man/woman. Broad categories form in networks of social relations that regularly position individuals together in a category; the members of the group, then, fulfill roles that build up broad competencies and shape identities. Women do the caregiving, men do the...? Such broad divisions of labor are efficient. But, O'Connor argues,

Once categories have been adopted, the cultural dynamics that lead to bargaining norms are radically changed. New norms that are inequitable, but not especially efficient, arise. And once they do, they can be self-perpetuating. In other words, the development of types sets the stage for serious inequity to spontaneously emerge and to persist between social groups (2019, p. 4).

For example, if Alice and Bob are bargaining, and Alice is invested in the care of another, e.g., her infant, and Bob is not, Alice's options are more limited than Bob's, for Alice will not accept a bargain in which the dependent's well-being is compromised. In the literature, this is where a disagreement point becomes a threatpoint:

[In this bargaining situation], power differentials between bargaining agents become salient. Suppose one player is able to

¹⁵ See also Skyrms (1996; 2004). Cf. D'Arms et al (1998); D'Arms (2000).

issue a more credible threat than the other, for whatever reason. Because the less powerful player now stands to lose more should the bargaining fail, the more powerful player derives an advantage. (O'Connor, 2019, p. 117)

The fact that the social division of labor has positioned women, as a whole, as caregivers and men not, means that women are systematically disadvantaged, and 'small differences of inequity between genders...can feed into...processes that generate more serious inequity' (2019, p. 118). (Another relevant difference in gendered bargaining is who has the better fallback position (2019, p. 124).)¹⁶ Although O'Connor focuses on examples concerning gender in her work, clearly the threatpoints for the poor, the disabled, the undocumented, and members of other vulnerable social categories will diminish their bargaining power and so make it difficult for them to resist or disrupt social hierarchy. Because O'Connor situates coordination problems *within* social practices that may shape choices and identities, some versions of evolutionary game theory can be a tool among many to explain social stability.

b. Categories and Power

If we are to make sense of structural and systematic *injustice*, we should consider how power circulates in social systems. When discussing the relationships between family members above, I mentioned the social position of legal parent and the fact that legal parents have rights and responsibilities for their children. This brings power with it. Legal parents have the power to make medical and educational decisions for their children and prevent others from doing so; they have the power to raise their children with their values and discipline them to conform to their (reasonable) expectations. Parental power is both enabling and constraining for everyone in the family.

There is a literature on power that makes several assumptions that are not helpful when considering structural injustice (Dahl, 1957; Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; Lukes, 1974; discussed in Hayward, 2000, Ch. 2):

¹⁶ Nancy Folbre (2020, p. 35) argues that in patriarchal systems, women are systematically disadvantaged due to a gendered form of 'compulsory altruism'.

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- (i) power is dyadic: an individual A has power over an individual B when A can ‘control’ how B acts, e.g., by direct influence (coercion or other forms of pressure), by manipulating the circumstances, or by manipulating B’s understanding of the circumstances,
- (ii) power ‘over’ is presumptively problematic: it is assumed that A exercises *undue* influence and compromises B’s freedom or autonomy,
- (iii) the exercise of power is intentional, or at least the powerful agent must be aware of the problematic consequences for B: this is required for A to be held responsible.

Illicit dyadic power over is certainly one form of power. Individuals who have illicit power over another, can manipulate the agency of others intentionally, and this is morally problematic. But individualist accounts of this sort fail to capture the ways in which the structural conditions for agency distribute power.

First, in addition to individuals behaving wrongfully towards other individuals, there are background structures that produce group hierarchies, e.g., racial hierarchy. A White person in the United States can avoid certain positional vulnerabilities; this is a form of privilege. Given the history of housing segregation, this might simply be a matter of where they grew up and what resources were available there. Injustices that situate groups in social, economic, political, or cultural hierarchies are forms of oppression. Second, although individuals in the dominant group will often have hostile or derogatory beliefs about the members of an oppressed group and act intentionally to thwart them, such attitudes are neither necessary nor sufficient for oppression and do not capture the nature of the injustice. And third, at least some groups that are the alleged target of oppression are constituted through the oppressive social practices. In such cases, groups consist, initially, of those with positional vulnerabilities and advantages relative to the structure. When vulnerability turns into social hierarchy oppression occurs; when hierarchy loops back to create increased vulnerability and further entrench hierarchy, oppression is systemic.

Capitalism is a paradigm of a system where vulnerability is exploited to produce an oppressed group. Using a toy model, in order for capitalism to work, there needs to be a division of labor. Some individuals own the means of production and others provide labor. Those who provide labor don’t have some ‘natural’ feature in common that makes them members of a group. Rather, their circumstances make it necessary for them to work for a wage (this is a

relevant vulnerability). However, given the exploitation built into capitalism, a group is created, viz., workers. We need not assume that capitalists have hostile or derogatory attitudes towards those they hire; we need not assume that workers identify with each other and develop class consciousness. But oppression of workers happens nevertheless because it is part of the structure of capitalism that labor must be exploited to gain profit.

How is the construction of class structural? Recall that structures are networks of social relations that are constituted through practices, and practices are learned patterns of behavior that draw on social meanings to enable us to coordinate around the production, management, disposal of things of (positive or negative) value. The practices of capitalist production differentiate positions, e.g., workers, management, and owners, each with their roles in transforming ‘raw’ materials into commodities: wage workers, in contrast to managers or owners, may punch timeclocks, wear uniforms, have strict limits on breaks; managers, in contrast to workers or owners, may have to meet quotas of production, insure health and safety compliance, and manage payroll, etc.¹⁷ The social relations between them, e.g., worker/manager, manager/owner, worker/worker, set constraints on what is possible – the choice architecture – for those occupying each position. ‘Possibility’ in this context concerns how action is governed by rights and responsibilities, social norms and rules for behavior, and a frame of material and semiotic opportunities. It does not follow from this form of group construction that oppression occurs: A group may consist of individuals who occupy a particular node in a set of relations, without the group being oppressed. However, the group will be oppressed if the relevant structure of social relations is wrongful or unjust, e.g., if, for example, the worker is not paid a fair wage, or if the conditions of work are unacceptable (Anderson, 2017).

Note, however, that the structure is such that the manager, and even the owner, are also limited in their options. The structure of capitalist production constrains the choice architecture of everyone involved. Exploitation of workers occurs whether or not owners or managers have hostile or derogatory attitudes towards workers as a group (though they might have or develop such attitudes, and their lack of attention or concern to worker welfare is surely an issue); and exploitation oppresses workers, even if they don’t have a shared

¹⁷ Of course not all capitalist enterprises produce commodities, and not all are structured as a factory. I use this just as a standard example to make the point about the structural notion of a group.

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identity or way of life (I assume that 'way of life' extends beyond the workplace, but even within the workplace, wage workers have very different jobs and daily routines). (Cf. Young, 1990, p. 44 and 46.) So it is a mistake to think that the nature of group oppression can be captured by focusing on the attitudes of the dominant or the subordinate group. However, attitudes are not irrelevant. It is important to be attentive to the particular feedback loops that are typical in the dynamic constitution of such groups: practices position certain groups as subject to (or vulnerable to) oppression, which, in turn, has the result that members have a (morally) relevant feature in common, and this sets conditions for forming a shared identity or way of life for those in the group; this shared identity may then be targeted more directly as the vulnerability of the group becomes more visible, but it can also provide a basis for solidarity and resistance.

As Clarissa Hayward (2000) points out,

[A]ny account that defines the relation between power and freedom as essentially one through which the powerful constrain the independent or authentic action of the powerless draws attention away from the politically significant ways power shapes freedom for all social actors, within and beyond relations in which they participate as relatively powerful and powerless agents. (2000, p. 27)

Hayward is situated in a theoretical tradition that emphasizes how power defines fields of action for all social actors (Foucault, 1979; Bourdieu, 1984). Power is never just an instrument for actors to possess and use to control others (2000, p. 30). 'Its mechanisms consist in, for example, laws, rules, symbols, norms, customs, social identities, and standards, which constrain and enable inter- and intrasubjective action' (2000, p. 30). One's power in a social context will often depend on one's bargaining position (consider the discussion of O'Connor above), and this, in turn, will depend on the resources – things taken to have value – one has at one's disposal. How resources and responsibilities are distributed through social practices affects the threatpoints where a bargain becomes unacceptable and what fallback options are available. The powerful will have more resources, fewer limiting responsibilities, and better fallback options, and this enables them more often to get what they want; this is a kind of power. The power need not be dyadic (thought sometimes it is), but can nevertheless lead to unjust social hierarchy. Another form of social power is to be able to act on power structures and social fields to 'participate effectively in shaping and re-shaping

relationships defined by the practices and institutions that govern...-action' (2000, p. 81).¹⁸

Let's return to the example of legal parent. I am not the biological parent of either of my children; they are adopted. I am one of their legal parents. There are many historically and culturally specific practices that not only shape parenthood in our family, but even make it possible. For example, my parenthood was granted through legal actions taken by the birthmothers, birthfathers, social workers, courts, and, of course, Steve and me. It was monitored in an ongoing way by social workers, teachers, medical professionals, insurance companies, and such, who had an influence on how we parented, with a real threat of family disruption if we didn't do it according to certain expectations. Such background threats are not uncommon in communities of color and poor communities, but they are rare in our socio-economic class. Like many families, we were also monitored by neighbors, friends, extended family, and strangers, and we learned to conform our family practices to broadly shared cultural expectations.¹⁹

The system grants rights to adoptive parents, even if you don't want them. We had the right to deny the birth families access to our children, but we have open adoptions and did not want that right and never exercised it. So adoptive parents have a power in the legal system that birth parents who relinquish their children lack, even if there is an agreement not to exercise the power. It is a structural power. The fact that we are an affluent, educated, heterosexual, White couple meant that we could easily navigate the system, and favorable impressions of us influenced the decisions that others made and facilitated our becoming parents and remaining parents in good-standing. (Though the fact that Steve is Jewish prevented us from being allowed to use some Christian-based agencies,

¹⁸ Thanks to Adam Hosein for urging me to clarify this account of power.

¹⁹ Massachusetts passed the first law granting rights to adoptive parents in the United States in 1851, and in the UK adoption only became legal in 1926. Adoption was primarily for infertile heterosexual biological parents to adopt babies. In 1998, Oregon granted Oregon-born adoptees over 21 to have access to their original (unredacted) birth certificates, thus giving them access to the names of their biological parents; as of December 2021, only nine states have followed suit. (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Adoption-of-Children-Act>) Same-sex and transracial adoption remain controversial to this day. The foster care system in the United States is deeply problematic and unjust and has been so for many decades. See Roberts (2002; 2012; 2022).

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and the fact that our children are African American and we are White prompted concerns and has exposed us to criticism and extra surveillance.) The decisions, themselves, occurred within a choice architecture that law and social practice made available and were made with sincere efforts to be thoughtful and conscientious; yet every one was a vehicle for transferring power and responsibility to us. It is crucial to note that the thoughtfulness of some of the agents in making good decisions, within existing constraints, did not make the system a good or just system. Many were good agents working in a bad system, a system that is wrongfully structured and that has had consequences.

Because our family is structured by open transracial adoptions, we also faced hurdles. There are many lacunae in the norms for families such as ours,²⁰ and there are occasions when, as outliers, we faced ignorance, incomprehension, and even painful push-back. To be clear: both law and culture frame the possibilities for acceptable action, and life is mostly lived within that frame. It not only becomes much more difficult when you don't fit the frame, but options outside the frame are often not even considered, and can even be socially or legally prohibited, e.g., a child can have two legal mothers if they are married, but in order for an adoptive mother to gain parental rights, the birth-mother must relinquish hers. Particular individuals acting outside the frame usually doesn't change it: treating the birth families of our children as full family members does nothing to change the rights of adoptive parents (though, of course, collective action might).

Structural power of this sort differs from illicit dyadic power of the sort described above. First, power affects actions and options of individuals, and it can be wielded by individuals. But the power is also embedded in the choice architecture created by law and social practice. I have illustrated this by showing how law and culture have affected my options for parenting; but social practices shape almost every action we perform. Second, power should not be presumed to be illicit or problematic. Coordination is essential to human survival and coordination requires that we engage in practices that shape our behavior and interaction; these will distribute power. In some cases, the practices establish morally problematic social relations

²⁰ The first time we heard that we had been chosen by a birthmom, we had to ask ourselves, 'What do you wear when your meet your child's birth-mother for the first time?' This, of course, is not a weighty issue, but it exemplifies the sense of dislocation that often arises when outliers are navigating social space.

that should be eliminated. In other cases, the social relations are not the problem; instead, the problem lies in unjust access to the positions they constitute. And in yet other cases, the relations are not problematic and the access to the power they confer is morally permissible, even good.²¹ And third, in a complex social system, power circulates without there always being someone who is responsible. This often happens in bureaucracies, e.g., taking advantage of certain disability benefits may disqualify an individual from the particular employment that provided them necessary medical benefits. This problem was not designed by anyone, and given the details, it might have been very difficult for any single individual or policy committee to foresee. And changing the policy, or even working around it, may not be under any individual's control, or it may not be feasible to overhaul the system. It is a structural problem.

6. How Injustice 'Lands on the Body'

Thus far, I've focused on King's call to understand structural and systemic wrongs in the context of racial hatred and murder. But I also quoted Coates to make sure that we keep in mind how oppression, and racism in particular, 'lands on the body'. Racism makes and keeps people sick, e.g., it creates housing segregation, mass incarceration, and poverty that results in food deserts and violence; it exposes groups to toxic waste and excess pollution; it produces disparities in medical care and education. It also, in Coates words, 'dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth'. Of course, the list could go on. Can an account of systemic injustice such as the one I've sketched do justice to the ways that racism, and other forms of oppression, land on the body?

I've argued that social meanings provide tools to mark or register things as valuable; they provide us scripts for dividing labor in producing, distributing, maintaining, and eliminating what's valued. In some cases, the meanings and norms are codified in law or other explicit policy. But social life is mostly enacted fluently and managed by less formal means.²² Fluency is crucial, because

²¹ Thanks to Sonny Kim for helping me think through these different cases.

²² It is common to use the analogy with language. When we speak a language, we do so without consulting rules of grammar; our speech is not always strictly grammatical, but communication happens nevertheless;

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deliberation about every action, every gesture, every glance, would make our participation in social life too burdensome and time-consuming and would be collectively inefficient. In teaching social skills, we don't focus on having our children learn a set of rules (though we may use 'summary rules' as guides), but rather, use discipline: we scaffold a process of developing the right dispositions in the right contexts.²³

In his work, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (1971/2014), Louis Althusser highlights the 'school-family' as the primary setting in which individuals learn the 'know-how' required for participation in capitalist production. However, learning technical 'know-how' is not enough:

...besides these techniques and knowledges, and in learning them, children at school also learn the 'rules' of good behaviour, i.e. the attitude that should be observed by every agent in the division of labour, according to the job he is 'destined' for: rules of morality, civic and professional conscience, which actually means rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination. They also learn to 'speak proper French', to 'handle' the workers correctly, i.e., actually (for the future capitalists and their servants) to 'order them about' properly, i.e. (ideally) to 'speak to them' in the right way, etc. (2014, pp. 235–36)

He calls this process of creating suitable kinds of social subjects, 'interpellation'. In the context of White Supremacy, we are also interpellated as racialized subjects.²⁴ I am a White social subject. I know how to navigate many social spaces as a 'good' White person, i.e., as someone who is excellent at being White. I can also identify someone who is crossing the boundaries of Whiteness. Marilyn Frye (1992) suggests:

and correction is not always necessary or desirable. As people use language in new ways, grammars, pronunciations, and lexicons evolve and communities come to have their own dialects. Some would argue that although language – and likewise practices – are not rule 'governed' in the sense that we do not consult rules as we speak, but our behavior conforms to rules. This does not do justice, I think, to the improvisational aspects of linguistic or social agency. (See also Hornsby, 2005; Bigelow and Schroeter, 2009.). In this section, I draw on Haslanger (2019a; 2019b).

²³ Note that I use 'discipline' in a Foucauldian sense here, so it is not all about punishment. See Foucault (1979).

²⁴ I discuss this also in Haslanger (2014).

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We need a term in the realm of race and racism whose grammar is analogous to the grammar of the term 'masculinity'. I am tempted to recommend the neologism 'albosity' for this honor, but I'm afraid it is too strange to catch on. So I will introduce 'whitely' and 'whiteness' as terms whose grammar is analogous to that of 'masculine' and 'masculinity'. Being whiteskinned (like being male) is a matter of physical traits presumed to be physically determined; being whitely (like being masculine) I conceive as a deeply ingrained way of being in the world (1992, p. 151).

She continues:

There is of course a large literature on racism, but I think that what I am after here is not one and the same thing as racism, either institutional or personal. Whiteness is connected to institutional racism...by the fact that individuals with this sort of character are well-suited to the social roles of agents of institutional racism, but it is a character of persons, not of institutions (1992, p. 152).

In one sense, then, race 'lands on the body' through the interpellation of racialized subjects: we become fluent in racial practices. We read the racial meanings directed at us; we develop the 'right kind' of racial dispositions; we participate in managing and distributing resources along racial lines.²⁵ We may be aware of it, or not; we may agree with it, or not. We may even resist it, but defection from entrenched practices (as in the case of opening an adoption discussed above), does not change the practice, or even one's own learned responses. It takes work to unlearn a form of subjectivity which is also a form of embodiment.

One might reasonably complain, however, that Coates surely had in mind a different sense of racism 'landing on the body' than the interpellation of a social subject. We must be clear: some forms of racialization are brutal. Althusser distinguished between the repressive state apparatus (RSA) and the ideological state apparatus (ISA) as methods of social regulation and control. In the case of White Supremacy, the RSA uses coercion – police brutality, incarceration, murder – to keep subjects in their place. And through ideologically shaped practices, it interpellates police officers, boarder agents, judges, military officers, and the like, to do the coercive work of the state, often violently. ISAs primarily use the practices of culture,

²⁵ I take this to be what Bourdieu would call a 'habitus' (1972/1977, p. 72). See also Haslanger (2019a).

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e.g., the school, the family, the street, to interpellate subjects less coercively, and it does not give non-state agents explicit permission to employ coercive force to interpellate others in their community.²⁶ But it happens. Resources and identity are at stake. Travis McMichael, Gregory McMichael, and William Bryan were not officers of the state. And yet, they took it upon themselves to ‘defend’ the boundaries of their White social space when they shot Ahmaud Arbery, as did George Zimmerman when he shot Trayvon Martin. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said in his eulogy, ‘we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers’. Racial categories establish a division of labor, and also divisions of social entitlement, social belonging, social credibility, social autonomy, social power. White Supremacy is a system whose structure is composed of social practices that we become fluent in and are taught are natural and right. Power circulates in the system unjustly. Although agents can rightfully be blamed for their racial hatred, their actions in policing racial boundaries, and their naïve complicity, it is also true that the system not just ‘produced the murderers’ but produces all racialized subjects, whether we want it or not.

7. Conclusion

Let’s now return to the questions motivating our discussion. First, how should we understand systemic, structural, institutional racism? What does it mean to say that injustice is systemic or structural? Are these different terms for the same thing?

Recall that a system is a particular set of things working together in a way that forms a whole. A social system is one that is structured by a network of relations that emerge and depend on social learning. I argued that these relations are formed in social practices that organize us in response to things taken to have positive or negative value, where the value of something is encoded culturally in social meanings. Societies, as I understand them, are complex dynamic systems, so they are self-organizing due to positive feedback loops,

²⁶ There isn’t a clear line between repressive and non-repressive systems: repression stands behind practices that aren’t on their face repressive, and practices that are on their face repressive are implemented by subjects who have been interpellated to enact them in seemingly non-repressive practices. I maintain, however, that nevertheless, there is a meaningful distinction between discipline and violence.

are not straightforwardly decomposable due to the significant interaction between ‘levels’.

Structural injustice occurs when the practices that create the structure – the network of positions and relations – (a) distort our understanding of what is valuable²⁷, or (b) organize us in ways that are unjust/harmful/wrong, e.g., by distributing resources unjustly or violating the principles of democratic equality.

Systemic injustice occurs when an unjust structure is maintained in a complex system that its self-reinforcing, adaptive, and creates subjects whose identity is shaped to conform to it.

One might ask: Why do we need this distinction? Does it really matter if we talk about systemic or structural injustice? Can there be structural injustice without systemic injustice?²⁸ On my view, it is important to keep in mind that societies are particular complex dynamic systems that exist at a time, a place, and with a particular culture, though it may be structurally similar to another system at a different time, a different place, and a different culture. As mentioned before, we can consider the structure of a society at different levels of generality. Every society has a way of organizing adult-child and other kinship relations, but they differ in the details. If we are seeking to identify injustice, sometimes it is important to consider the kinds of relations that structure the society, but sometimes we have to consider the particular historical instantiation of them and the ways they intersect in a system.

For example, consider marriage. There are many forms of marriage across history and culture. Some would argue that marriage itself – as a social relation, in whatever form – is patriarchal, and any system that is structured by marriage is unjust. Others would argue, however, that the social relation of marriage itself is not unjust. Whether marriage is unjust depends on how it is instantiated in a system: what form it takes, how it is connected to other social relations, and the rights and responsibilities that the network of relations affords. By distinguishing structures and systems, we are, I believe, in a better position to attend not just to structures, but to their dynamic interdependence in particular social contexts, in order to root out injustice.

In principle, there can be structural injustice without systemic injustice when considering injustice that is not part of a complex

²⁷ It may be worth noting that I’m a pluralist about value. See Anderson (1993).

²⁸ Thanks to Rachel Fredericks for pushing me on this.

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system; honestly, I'm not really sure what that would look like, but don't want to rule it out. The reason for linking structural injustice to systemic injustice, however, is to highlight that systems are (dynamically) homeostatic and manage themselves without a central authority. Often structures are understood as rules or laws that are designed by policy makers and enforced by norms or punitive measures. Just saying that structures need not be constituted by rules is an important step, but it is not enough, for it leaves the idea that we just need to change a particular rule or practice in order to achieve justice. But if societies are complex systems, then because such systems accommodate perturbation, such a change can be incorporated while maintaining injustice. In other words, efforts to achieve justice must attend to particular structures but also look beyond them to the system as a whole. Because social systems are not constituted by collective intentionality – our joint agency is not the 'central authority' – changing our minds only goes so far. Social systems are material parts of the world, and sometimes we cannot easily see beyond the world we have created in order to change it. Moreover, the system is not entirely under our control. The complexity of the social world is obscured by the platitude that the social world is 'mind-dependent' and the temptation to think that social systems are decomposable and can be fixed piece by piece. We have to begin thinking in different terms.

Second, how do systemic and structural racism 'land upon the body'? I've drawn on Althusser's conception of interpellation to argue that social subjects are interpellated to enact injustice; more often than not, individuals – 'good subjects' – carry this out unthinkingly. Those who resist face condemnation and coercion. On this view, a cultural *technē* is the cultural dimension of the local social-regulation system.²⁹ When internalized by individuals, it provides tools for psycho-somatic self-regulation that enables fluent coordination with others; it also structures our subjectivity. We don't need to be coerced to fulfill (most of) our social roles. We do it 'all by ourselves'. Those who are recruited to do the coercive work of the state are permitted to employ violent means to make sure individuals 'stay in their lane'. And those who appoint themselves as defenders of the local

²⁹ In Haslanger (2019a) I argue that subjectivization not only occurs in dominant contexts, but also in counter-publics and subaltern communities. It isn't done once and for all, and the fact that we occupy different subject and social positions depending on context is important for the broader analysis.

system also take to violence when the norms of structure-sustaining practices are violated and seem to put the structure at risk.

Because of its coordinating function, social structures have some degree of normative force. We cannot survive without coordinating, and even bad forms of coordination can be better than social chaos. Yet insofar as the structure regulates our interactions in ways that are problematic (morally, epistemically, politically), it is an apt target for critique and we ought to change it. But it is a difficult question how we can change a social system, given that it is self-regulating and self-sustaining. Changes in attitudes or particular practices can be accommodated. Systems survive perturbation. However, they also ‘learn’ and evolve; it is possible to tip the system. When and which direction it will tip is unclear. Yet, as Lisa Fithian says, echoing generations of activists, ‘The personal is political. Every choice we make is an exercise of our power’ (2019, p. 262). The struggle takes many forms, some of which are on the edge of chaos, and we can barely fathom them (Warren, 2015). Audre Lorde (1984) reminds us,

As we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us... These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman’s place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep. (Lorde, 1984, pp. 36-87).³⁰

³⁰ Thanks to Maria Alvarez, Kristin Andrews, Ásta, Aaron Burman, Sam Berstler, Maria Brincker, Amandine Catala, Ann Ferguson, Rachel Fredericks, Lori Gruen, Jay Hodges, Pat Hope, Adam Hosein, Jonathan Ichikawa, Chike Jeffers, Alison Koslow, Heidi Lockwood, Cailin O’Connor, Sonia Pavel, Peter Railton, Naomi Scheman, Jack Spencer, Eliza Wells, Taraneh Wilkinson, and participants in my online presentation for the Royal Institute of Philosophy. Special thanks to Sahar Heydari Fard for her patience in teaching me about complex dynamic systems and so much more. I also owe thanks to many who have been acknowledged in papers of my own that are cited in this paper, but to list them all would take pages!

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SALLY HASLANGER (shaslang@mit.edu) is Ford Professor of Philosophy and Women's & Gender Studies at MIT. Her publications include *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (Oxford, 2012) and *What is Race? Four Philosophical Views*, with Joshua Glasgow, Chike Jeffers, and Quayshawn Spencer (Oxford, 2019).