

## Who's in Charge Here? Micro, Meso, Macro Interactions

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### Abstract

Societies are complex dynamic systems and, as a result, are self-organizing – without central authorities – due to their internal structure. Broad social systems are composed of co-integrated sub-systems, such as political and economic systems, but also transportation systems, health care systems, and education systems. To explain how such systems emerge, change, interact, and collapse, we should attention to different (micro, meso, and macro) levels of analysis. Following the work of Giddens, Sewell, and others, I argue that the structure of a social system is constituted by social practices – socially learned patterns of interaction – that enable us to coordinate and communicate. Such practices rely on a set of tools – a “cultural technē” – for collectively interpreting and responding to the material conditions. The structure of a system shapes and constrains agency, but the possibility of individual improvisation, material intervention, and political organizing can – at least locally – influence how the system develops.

### 1. Introduction

The climate is a complex dynamic system. The system allows for considerable variability across years, but it was relatively stable for some time, meaning that the average weather over centuries remained within an expected range. This, in itself, is remarkable, given that the climate is influenced by so many factors, including the water cycle, the carbon cycle, shifting conditions at the core of the earth (did you know there is a “rock cycle”!), biochemical cycles, and of course human activity. This stability occurs because there are feedback loops between the cycles at different levels that adjust for variation. Complex systems need not be as large or as complicated as climate. Something as simple as body temperature involves looping interaction between systems that keep it mostly within a narrow range. (The nervous system, circulatory system (contraction of the blood vessels), and limbic system (sweating), etc. are all involved.)

As we know, the climate is changing more dramatically now, and variation is no longer within the normal range. I raise the fact that the climate is a complex dynamic system, not because today's lecture will be about climate change (I am not a climate scientist!), but because we have become familiar with the idea that the climate is not like a car engine that is easily decomposable into mechanically interacting parts. We know that climate involves complex interactions between different subsystems, and that there are risks of reaching a tipping point where changes may rapidly cascade. However, another lesson we learn from discussion of climate change is that although humans are not in charge, we can make a difference. Particular individuals can have significant influence, and we must engage in collective action to change our relationship to and exploitation of the environment.

My goal in these lectures is to urge us to think of societies, or social formations, using the model of a complex dynamic system. I am not going to argue that human civilization, or democracy, is near some sort of tipping point. So to that extent, bringing up climate change may be misleading. But if we begin to see societies as complex systems, then, I hope, we can better understand their stability, variations, and potential for transformative change.

Broadly speaking, three sets of questions arise in the project of social theory. One set of questions is

*ontological*: how do social formations develop, change, expand, disappear. I've already gestured at my ontology: societies are complex systems composed of networks of social relations established in practices; these networks are subsystems of the broader system. (Think of the circulatory and limbic systems as subsystems of the individual body system as a whole.) I will expand on the ontological questions today. Another set is *normative*: Why do we form societies? What purposes do they serve? What are good or rational ways to form societies? How do societies go wrong? And third set is *critical*: Why are our current societies irrational, oppressive, or unjust? Why is it so hard to break out of patterns of oppression and injustice? How might we promote transformative social change.

My primary interest lies in the third, critical, set of questions. However, to answer them, I think we also need to consider the first two sets. A better understanding of social ontology (how social formations emerge and become stable, and how to locate the leverage points for change) can inform both our critique and our activism. Normative inquiry enables us to identify wrongs embodied in our current social formation and can provide directions for improvement. So in the second lecture I will take up questions about sources of normativity and critique, and in the final lecture I will invite us to confront one of the deepest challenges of any society: the risks and opportunities that arise from human interdependence.

## 2. Dual and Triple Systems

### A. Levels and Targets of Analysis

A typical society is a system with a variety of interacting subsystems, including the economy, the political system, religion and other cultural formations; it also includes material subsystems such as food systems, health care systems, and carceral systems. A fundamental assumption of social theory, and one that I endorse, is that social formations are at least partly composed of individuals, and individual agency is important in explaining how they work. It does not follow from this, however, that systems are reducible to or explicable *wholly* in terms of the interactions between individuals. Social practices are a site where culture is enacted by individuals in response to material conditions. So, in addition to the *macro level* (the system) and the *micro level* (the individual), there is a *meso level* that is not always aptly recognized: the level of social practices and the specific social relations and institutions that they constitute (Tilly 1996, 2002),

Attention to different levels of analysis is important in order to answer the different questions we might be asking. For example, we might be asking about how global capitalism has developed in the past two centuries; this is a macro-level question. Or we might be asking about how the privatization of health care in the United States has increased the racial health gap; this is a meso-level question. Or we might be asking why a specific health care company, managed by a particular board of directors, has an unusually high rate of infant mortality; this is, at least potentially, a micro-level question. Each of these topics can be analyzed at different levels, placing different phenomena in the foreground and other phenomena in the background (Hayward forthcoming); but different choices about what to foreground or background affect the adequacy of the explanation (Haslanger 2016). For example, an individualist (micro) account of high infant mortality in facilities managed by a particular health care company may well depend on the influence of particular individuals on the board of directors, so warrant some inquiry and response at the micro level. When considering the influence of individuals, other factors may shift to the background, e.g., economic pressures on the company and how these

affect patient care based on their race, location, immigration status, and more.<sup>1</sup> The analyses at different levels need not compete, but may well supplement each other, for they are answers to different questions (Garfinkel 1990). A full understanding, however, may require a multi-level analysis.

I've just argued that systems can be analyzed at different levels of generality (micro, meso, macro). However, we should also distinguish theoretical attempts to capture the essential features of a system by attending to how it is realized in different times and places from accounts of how a system is actually working here and now. For example, if we are interested in capitalism, as a system, one set of questions concerns what is *essential* to capitalism, or what possible social formations count as capitalist. Another set of questions concerns the *historically specific* form of capitalism that has evolved and is currently entrenched (Arruzza 2015a, 2015b; cf. Berman 2022, 132). The same contrast may be made for patriarchy or White supremacy. For example, our actual social formation – the historical token – may be a fusion of capitalism, patriarchy, and White supremacy; this fusion may not have been necessary, even if there is a “structural basis for its persistent entanglement” (Fraser 2022, 40). My interest in this lecture is in our historically specific social formation, and how it works to produce race, class, and gender and other forms of oppression.<sup>2</sup> This focus on our actual social formation is important in order to grasp the intersectional challenges we currently face, and how to address them. (See also Kim 2024, especially Ch. 4.)

There is a long history of debates over the interaction between capitalism and other forms of oppression. For example, socialist feminists have, for decades, debated the issue how patriarchy and capitalism are related. Some, but not all, have rejected a model that treats patriarchy and capitalism as distinct systems, i.e., dual systems theory (Young 1980/1990). Similar debates have been part of critical race theory: Is White supremacy a distinct system in addition to capitalism? And even if, in principle, they could be separated, how are they entangled here and now? Cinzia Arruzza captures the issue:

We can put the original version of this [multi-systems] thesis in the following terms: Gender and sexual relations constitute an autonomous system which combines with capitalism and reshapes class relations, while being at the same time modified by capitalism in a process of reciprocal interaction. The most up-to-date version of this theory includes racial relations, also considered as a system of autonomous social relations interconnected with gender and class relations. (2014a, 3)

The language of “autonomous” systems that are also “interconnected” in “reciprocal interaction” is somewhat confusing.<sup>3</sup> Interdependent systems are surely not autonomous from each other because they

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<sup>1</sup> I will use the terms ‘micro,’ ‘meso,’ and ‘macro’ somewhat loosely, relative to the topic of inquiry. For example, when raising questions about a particular health care company, analysis at the meso level will plausibly focus on practices within that company and interacting practices across social domains at that level; analysis at the macro level, relative to this question, could be patterns that emerge across the national approach to health care that are also instantiated in the company. However, we might also want to raise questions about a national health care system, and the meso level would be at the national level and the macro level would plausibly concerns patterns and dynamics in the global provision of health care. By ‘micro,’ I usually have individuals and their states of mind in the foreground.

<sup>2</sup> These are not the only social categories or forms of oppression that are produced, e.g., it also produces disability, ethnic, national, sexual categories, and the like. However, I will focus on race, class, and gender (the “big 3”) in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> It is not completely clear how to interpret “autonomous” in this debate. In contemporary computer science, the term “autonomous” is typically used to characterize systems that do not require input from humans in order to function. So, for example, a self-driving car or robot is an autonomous system insofar as it does not rely on human

depend on each other to function. It will be helpful, then, to articulate a number of claims that multi-system theorists are (or seem to be) committed to:

- 1) Capitalism, patriarchy, and White supremacy are distinct and autonomous social systems.
- 2) Capitalism, patriarchy, and White supremacy mutually interact (perhaps also with other macro-level systems) to create our current social formation.
- 3) None of these systems dominates or controls the others overall, though in particular contexts, one may have explanatory priority.

Below I will aim to unpack some of these claims by offering an account of social systems that will enable us to better understand kinds of autonomy and interdependence that are at issue. But first let's consider some alternatives.

Many of those who reject multiple-system theories take the variety of seemingly separate systems to be part of a single capitalist formation (Fraser 2017, 2022). For example, Nancy Fraser argues that it is a mistake to understand capitalism as simply an economic system. She says, "I can sum up my view in this way: capitalism is best conceived neither as an economic system nor as a reified form of ethical life, but rather as an institutionalized social order, on a par with feudalism, to take an example" (Fraser 2022, 19). This sounds like a single-system approach (one capitalist institutionalized social order), but with differentiated "spheres," e.g., the spheres of the economy, politics, social reproduction, and the like, that are "artifacts of capitalism."

[Weber and Habermas] hold that capitalist society encompasses a plurality of "value spheres," each of which has its own "inner logic" of development. My view is akin to that idea, but it differs in a crucial respect: for me the "spheres" in question are not natural kinds but artifacts of capitalism. Each of them gets its distinctive quality (its normativity, its social ontology) from the position it occupies in the larger institutional structure – from the way it is set apart from, and made to contrast with, the other constitutive elements of that structure, including the capitalist economy. (Fraser & Jaeggi 2018, 68)

This suggests that although there is an interdependence between the economy, politics, social reproduction, and ethical life, each of which as "its own 'inner logic'," their historically evolving boundaries arise to serve capitalism. As I understand it, this is the basis for saying that the

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control. In the context of mathematics, the characterization of a system as 'autonomous' concerns whether a system of differential equations depends on the independent variable. For example, assuming time as the independent variable, a system may be time-invariant because changing the value of the variable for time makes no difference. In the context of social theory, it is less clear what it means for a system to be autonomous. One option would be to take an autonomous system to be a closed system, i.e., either is bounded in such a way that it either admits no transfer of matter or energy, or at least no transfer of matter (but allows transfer of energy). It is implausible that any social system is closed in this way. So how should we understand the claim that, say, capitalism and racism are autonomous systems? For the purposes of this paper, I will assume that when two systems are interdependent or co-integrated – they each depend on the other to sustain themselves – then they are not autonomous of each other. So, for example, the respiratory system and circulatory system are not autonomous *with respect to each other* because the respiratory system and circulatory system depend on each other in circulating oxygen and removing carbon dioxide from the body. Autonomy, then, is relative to the systems under consideration.

institutionalized social order, as a whole, is *capitalist*, giving capitalism a kind of explanatory priority over patriarchy, White Supremacy, and such.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Fraser's view differs from a multi-systems approach because it resists the idea that capitalism, patriarchy, and White supremacy are separate autonomous systems, and prioritizes the force of capitalism in shaping our current social order. Note, however, that capitalism may have explanatory priority in answering some questions about our social formation – why is society differentiated into these particular spheres? – but not in answering others.

My approach differs from both Fraser's view and a (generic) version of the multi-systems approach.<sup>5</sup> On my view, our current social formation – at the broadest level – is a complex dynamic system made up of multiple sub-systems. Its subsystems are material and are located at the meso-level, e.g., they include healthcare systems, educational systems, political systems. The dynamics that affect the workings of the subsystems and their interconnections are capitalist, patriarchal, and White supremacist (to name a few). To put it another way, capitalism, patriarchy, and White supremacy are not subsystems of the broader system, but instead are kinds of “logic”, that affect many all sorts of systems; they cross “spheres” and affect, e.g., transportation practices, healthcare practices, caregiving practices, educational practices, and the like. These dynamics interact to shape historically and culturally specific social practices and structures. Even if we can identify a distinctive capitalist logic, any particular manifestation will be entwined with other logics, e.g., the logics of colonialism, patriarchy, hetero- and cis-normativity, eugenics, and White supremacy. In short, multiple intersectional logics are at work in shaping our historically specific social formation and its interacting parts, and although capitalist logics may have explanatory priority in answering some questions, in any particular context, those logics themselves will be shaped by interacting logics.<sup>6</sup>

So I agree with the multi-systems approach that there is something important about identifying a variety of subsystems and their role in producing race, gender, class, and their intersections; there are multiple co-integrated systems that make up the social world. I will argue, however, that the relevant subsystems for movement building are at the meso-level and it is not always useful to single out capitalist logics as more important or causally significant than the others. I agree with Fraser that material subsystems are co-integrated in an institutionalized social order, but it is misleading to say that the order is “capitalism” even though it is “capitalist” (and also patriarchal, etc.). To emphasize capitalism this way oversimplifies the

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<sup>4</sup> Fraser is clear that this is not a form of economic determinism. “The implications of this view cut against economic determinism. By situating “the economy” in this way, we delimit it. And by revealing its dependence on the noneconomic backgrounds of social reproduction, ecology, and public power, we stress the latter's weight and societal importance, as well as their capacity to impact and indeed to destabilize historically entrenched regimes of accumulation.” (2018, 48)

<sup>5</sup> Fraser and Jaeggi (2018) discusses a contrast between practice theories and institutional theories, e.g. p. 53. I resist Fraser's suggestion that a practice theory is to be contrasted with a structural theory, since on my view, structures are constituted by practices. My view is closer to Jaeggi's.

<sup>6</sup> The language of “logics” is confusing for the term is used in different ways (Pavel 2025). I say more about my own understanding of the term below. Roughly, a ‘logic,’ on my view, is a particular a kind of system dynamic arising in the cultural technē. There are other dynamics at work in a complex social system, e.g., biological or geographical dynamics, that aren't, strictly speaking, logics. Plausibly, the economy also has multiple dynamics including a capitalist logic. It is important that on my account a system dynamic is not the same thing as a system (cf. Dembroff 2024).

dynamics of the social order in a way that can eclipse additional dynamics that have a life of their own. To further understand the issues, and what's at stake, it will be helpful to say more about systems theory, and to sketch my own approach more fully. However, before that I'll recap some of the debates over multi-systems theory so we can better see why it matters what account we give of our social ontology.

### *B. Social Reproduction*

The term 'social reproduction' is used in several ways. In the most general sense, it refers to the processes by which societies, or social formations, reproduce themselves over time (Wright 2010, 26). Socialist feminists use the term more narrowly to critique a reading of Marx that focuses on his conception of the economy. Marxians provide an account of (commodity) *production* that highlights the exploitation of the worker. But who *reproduces* the worker and prepares him for his role in capitalist production? Who meets the worker's sexual, emotional, nutritional, (etc.) needs to prepare him for another day at work? Isn't she exploited too?

I will follow the socialist feminist usage in distinguishing *societal* reproduction from the more specific *social* reproduction which forms social subjects. Social systems not only manage sexual reproduction, but also the broad range of the social and cultural work required for humans to become part of society. This is done as unwaged work in the family (also unwaged work by slaves) and in waged service work and education. And these tasks of social reproduction are usually assigned to women. They include:

the array of activities and relationships involved in maintaining people both on a daily basis and intergenerationally.....such as purchasing household goods, preparing and serving food, laundering and repairing clothing, maintaining furnishings and appliances, socializing children, providing care and emotional support for adults, and maintaining kin and community ties. (Glenn 1992, 1)

In short, modern historical processes not only reproduce class exploitation, but also a broad range of categories of oppression, including race, gender, disability, sexuality, immigrant status; and the processes in question are enacted not only through wage labor contracts, but through household activities and social structures that produce and maintain life and create and distribute forms of non-economic value. Social reproduction theory, broadly speaking, considers how these different domains and different processes interact to result in a variety of persistent forms of injustice (Federici 2019; Bhattacharya 2017).

So one question before us is whether social reproduction is best understood as achieved in an autonomous *patriarchal system* working alongside others, such as capitalism and White supremacy. In a common form of the early dual-systems models, patriarchy was viewed as a *transhistorical* system – that takes different forms in different times and cultures – for managing sex, reproduction, childcare, and other forms of “domestic” labor in ways that produce (usually binary) gendered subjects. For example, assuming a nuclear family with a caregiver-breadwinner family structure, patriarchy is the system that positions girls as caregivers and boys as breadwinners, e.g., by establishing norms for binary gender that socialize girls to act in and identify with the sphere of domestic labor and boys to act in and identify with paid labor and the public sphere.

There are two main criticisms of this dual systems model. (See, e.g., Young 1980/1990, 26.) Briefly, the first criticism is that taking patriarchy to be an autonomous transhistorical system is inadequate because male domination is always woven together with and realized in other forms of oppression: economic, ethnic, eugenic, heteronormative, and the like. In current social contexts, patriarchy intersects with the capitalist

economic system that manages waged domestic work and a gendered division of labor in production. (See Young 1980/1990; also Walby 1989.)<sup>7</sup> As Iris Young puts it, treating “differences in the specific characteristics of sexist oppression as merely “expressions” of one and the same universal system of male domination trivializes the depth and complexity of women’s oppression.” (Young 1980/1990, 26) Young’s second criticism is that if we look closely, we find that patriarchy is seamlessly integrated into the economic structure – each contributes to sustaining the other – and so it doesn’t make it a separate “autonomous” system. (This is a point that support’s Fraser’s view.) I’ll elaborate a bit on each concern.

Start with the first concern, i.e., attention to the complexity of women’s oppression. The issue of intersectionality and the corresponding hesitation to generalize about *women* across time, place, and culture, has been a central theme in feminist thought for decades.<sup>8</sup> For example, many have argued that the dual-system’s focus on the caregiver-breadwinner family structure is biased; the nuclear family assumed by this model is historically, geographically, race, and class specific (hooks 1984). Women of color and poor women have never *just* been caregivers (or not just “unwaged” caregivers in the family); and gender is constructed in the workplace as much as it is at home. Of course, the particular caregiver-breadwinner family is only supposed to be an example, but it seems to capture the workings of a separate patriarchal system only because it ignores the race and class dimensions of caregiving and social reproduction, more generally. Any model of our current system that attempts to separate the process of gendering from the processes of class division and racialization integrated with it is going to be inadequate.

For example, in her paper “From Servitude to Service Work” (1992), Evelyn Nakano Glenn argues that the structure of social reproduction in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century United States constituted racialized, economically positioned, women, not just women, as such.<sup>9</sup> Using Young’s words, to take social subjectivation to be done by patriarchy in the home “trivializes,” or oversimplifies, the process. More specifically, women of color – including Black women in the south, Latinas in the southwest, and Japanese women in California – were widely employed as domestic servants to White women (of all classes) in order to do all but birth the babies and, in particular, to do their “dirty work.” In some contexts “being served by members of the subordinate [racial-ethnic] group was a perquisite of membership in the dominant group.” (1992, 9) Moreover, those applying for jobs distinguished between different racial-ethnically coded categories: “domestics themselves were attuned to the racial-ethnic hierarchy among

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<sup>7</sup> Young (1980/1990, 25) distinguishes two basic kinds of dual systems theory, both of focus on the domain of social reproduction: “In my reading I have seen two general approaches to articulating the nature of the system of gender relations. The first understands the system of patriarchy as an ideological and psychological structure independent of specific social, economic, and historical relations. This version of the dual systems theory then attempts to give an account of the interaction of the ideological and psychological structures of patriarchy with the social and economic structures of class society. The second version of the dual systems theory considers patriarchy itself to be a particular system of social relations of production (or “reproduction”) relatively independent of the relations of production that Marxists traditionally analyze.” She allows that some authors, such as Rubin (1990) combine the two.

<sup>8</sup> Young (1980/1990) was attentive to the political as well as the theoretical issues: “On the one hand, it tends to create a false optimism regarding the possibility of a common consciousness among women. This can lead to serious cultural, ethnic, racial, and class biases in the account of the allegedly common structures of patriarchy. On the other hand, the notion of a single system of patriarchy that persists in basically unchanged form through different epochs paralyzes feminist action because it represents the beast we are struggling against as so ancient and monolithic.” (26)

<sup>9</sup> Glenn does not use the term ‘women of color’. She uses the term ‘racial-ethnic’ women “to refer collectively to groups that have been socially constructed and constituted as racially as well as culturally distinct from European Americans and placed in separate legal statuses from “free whites” (1992, fn4).

them. When advertising for jobs, women who did not identify themselves as Black overwhelmingly requested "housekeeping" or "governess" positions, whereas Blacks advertised for "cooking," "laundrying," or just plain "domestic work" (1992, 10 fn19)).<sup>10</sup> Through a situated analysis of this particular social formation in the United States, Glenn shows how social subjects are interpellated simultaneously along multiple dimensions into very different positions within the processes of social reproduction through both waged and unwaged labor.

It is an important feature of Glenn's account, that the system of social reproduction she studied did not constitute women as such, or racial groups as such.<sup>11</sup> The processes that create social subjects are, as Young and many others have suggested, more complex, so relying on generic categories such as *women*, or *Asians*, or *caregivers* to understand subjectivation fails to do justice to the phenomena.<sup>12</sup> (This may be true, even if, depending on the question we are asking, we can make some generalizations about gender or race.) In short, at least in the United States, there is no way to be gendered simpliciter, without that process of gendering at the same time being a racialization and a class positioning (*mutatis mutandis* for other social categories). This is relevant to the dual systems account because it seems to presuppose that there is one system that produces gender and another that produces class, and another that produces race, etc. We will return to this.

The second concern raised above was that if patriarchy manages social reproduction, it clearly functions as part of the economic system. Patriarchy supposedly reproduces the worker and the support system the worker relies upon, but the economic (capitalist) conditions structure the division of labor and the positions that need to be filled with bodies. For example, in the breadwinner/caregiver example, the economic conditions (since industrialization) divide society into, e.g., the spheres of work and home, and patriarchy interpellates individuals who occupy the different spheres. As Young argues, the dual systems model

gives no material weight to the system of patriarchy, which it defines in its basic structure as independent of the mode and relations of production, the social relations that proceed from them, and the processes of historical change. Thus this version of the dual systems theory ends by ceding to the traditional theory of production relations the primary role in giving an account of women's concrete situation. (Young 1980/1990, 26)

As she explains, on the dual systems model, patriarchy contributes to the form of social reproduction, but capitalism determines its content.

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<sup>10</sup> Although early in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, domestic labor in California and Hawaii was often done by Asian men (due to the "unfavorable sex ratio" (9)); once more Asian women immigrated, they "inherited the mantle of service" (Glenn 1992, 9).

<sup>11</sup> Of course there are many different kinds of social groups, some based on self-ascribed identity, some based on identification with others, some based on culture or belief. I mean to be restricting myself to groups that don't require identity, identification, shared culture/belief, etc., though these may arise under certain circumstances. Cf. Young 1990. I discuss this point further in Haslanger 2024.

<sup>12</sup> This is a point that scholars, especially Black and Latinx feminists, have been making for decades. See, e.g., hooks 1984, Lorde 1984/2007, Collins 1990, Lugones 2003. For further discussion see also McCall 2005, Nash 2008, Alexander-Floyd 2012, Carastathis 2016, Jorba et al 2019, Nash 2019, Bernstein 2020, Collins & Bilge 2020, and Dembroff 2024.

Some contemporary feminists have embraced the critique that patriarchy doesn't function as a separate system, by rejecting the dual systems model.<sup>13</sup> As mentioned above, Nancy Fraser, for example, expands capitalism to include the entire “historically elaborated social totality” (Fraser & Jaeggi 2018, 33) or an “institutionalized societal order” (2022, 19; see also pp. xv and 145 where she calls it “a type of society”) of which social reproduction is a necessary, but hidden, part. With her characteristically penetrating insight, she suggests,

Structurally...the division between social reproduction and commodity production is central to capitalism—*indeed, is an artefact of it*...Historically, the split between ‘productive’ waged work and unwaged ‘reproductive’ labour has underpinned modern capitalist forms of women’s subordination...reproductive labour is split off, relegated to a separate, ‘private’ domestic sphere, where its social importance is obscured. And in this new world, where money is a primary medium of power, the fact of its being unpaid seals the matter: those who do this work are structurally subordinate to those who earn cash wages, even as their work also supplies necessary preconditions for wage labour. (Fraser 2017, 148 (italics mine))

I too think that we can see society as a single system (with multiple sub-systems), and I agree with much of what Fraser and others have said in developing an alternative to the dual-systems theory. However, I agree with Young that we should not prioritize capitalism in giving an account of our current social formation, in particular to account for the constitution of racialized and gendered subjects. And although macro-level analysis is valuable, for it to inform critical social movements adequately, it must be attentive to the details of intersecting social processes at the meso-level, which we cannot explain by capitalist logics alone.

As I have suggested above, systems and their subsystems interact according to particular *dynamics*. For example, in the natural world, such dynamics affect how things interact and create feedback loops. Consider again the regulation of body temperature in humans.<sup>14</sup> The brain includes some hot- and cold-sensing neurons. These neurons send out thermoregulatory information to trigger relevant automatic responses in other sub-systems that enlarge or contract veins, produce sweat, etc., and these affect how the body retains or releases heat. In order to understand how the body maintains a regular temperature, we need to understand not only the dynamics of different sub-systems (neural, cardio-vascular, endocrine), but the dynamics that manage their interaction. As Hiroaki Kitano says, in a primer on systems biology,

While an understanding of genes and proteins continues to be important [in systems biology], the focus is on understanding a [biological] system’s structure and dynamics. Because a [biological] system is not just an assembly of genes and proteins, its properties cannot be fully understood merely by drawing diagrams of their interconnections. Although such a diagram represents an important first step, it is analogous to a static roadmap, whereas what we really seek to know are the traffic patterns, why such traffic patterns emerge, and how we can control them. (Kitano 2002, 1662)

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<sup>13</sup> There are multiple critiques I have not attempted to capture here. Moreover, the move to a single system analysis is motivated by multiple considerations. For example, Fraser also addresses the first concern I pointed to as well: “Far from being universal, then, the division between production and reproduction arose historically, with capitalism. But it was not simply given once and for all. On the contrary, the division mutated historically, taking different forms in different phases of capitalist development.” (2022,10)

<sup>14</sup> For more detail, see: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/neuroscience/thermoregulation>

In other words, a system may be represented in a static model, but the relations that form the structure of a dynamic system constrain and enable action and evolve over time.<sup>15</sup> Within a complex dynamic system, there can be multiple dynamics that interact with each other, some having more influence in some contexts and others in others. Capitalism provides one powerful dynamic in our contemporary social formation, but there are many other dynamics that, working together and in tension with each other, enable the system to maintain itself. I will argue that various social dynamics are embedded in culture and in the built environment and these produce looping-effects that are hard to disrupt.

Let me summarize some of the points we've covered before moving on:

1) The social formation within which we emerge as social agents combines multiple dynamics, including capitalist, patriarchal, White supremacist dynamics, across meso-level systems. There isn't a system that produces gender, a system that produces race, and a system that produces class. Locating gender or race subjectivation in separate systems ends up with what is sometimes called an "additive" account or "layer cake" account of intersectionality which fails to capture what Young was referring to when emphasizing the "complexity of women's oppression" (Garry 2011). Although Young didn't use the term 'complexity' in the technical sense, her point was that subjectivation does not happen step by step, social category by social category, but through integrated processes of subjectivation (See also Young 1990).

2) The relevant meso-level sub-systems of the social formation that constitute agents are material, e.g., educational systems, food systems, transportation systems, health care systems, economic and political systems. These sub-systems are co-integrated (interdependent) in a larger system. But they don't form a system that can be broken down into mechanically interacting parts. Social formations involve multiple dynamics that can and do integrate into effective processes, but the dynamics can also pull against each other. There is no unified "rationality" to the system (or to the oppressions it creates), nor should we expect there to be, even under ideal conditions.

As I will elaborate below, the sub-systems at the meso-level are concretely material, but they also depend on culture. The looping interaction between the material conditions and what Young calls the "phenomena of "consciousness," e.g., intellectual production, broad social attitudes and beliefs, cultural myths, symbols, images, etc." (Young 1980/1990, 33) constitutes the social world. The "logics" of capital, of race, of gender, of eugenics, (and more) are proper targets of critique, but intervention into the material conditions is also necessary as we seek systematic social change. Change of culture and mind is unlikely to "stick" if we continue to face the same material challenges produced by the old logics. However, because the different sub-systems are co-integrated in the broader social formation, intervening in one domain is a way of intervening in the whole, for our actions have a ripple effect. And at the same time, intervening along one

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<sup>15</sup> The particulars of system dynamics will depend on the sort of system one is considering. For example, in biology, chemical interactions amongst the parts will be responsible for some patterns in the process; more generally, forces acting within the system affect how it functions. However, systems exist in environments – which may be other systems – and the input from environmental conditions (availability of nourishment, presence of predators) are also important for explaining the system's behavior. "The internal organization of objects can be maintained only by excluding what would break down the organization and by permitting flows that support and foster it. This is another way of saying that systemic organization involves the emergence...of constraints that allow some sorts of flows from the environment but not others." (Mobus and Kalton 2015, 117)

dimension of oppression requires a consideration of the others for the dynamics that produce them are systemically linked.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. Systems and Structures

To consider how social processes construct certain kinds of social groups, I need to offer a more detailed picture about to think about practices, structures, and systems.<sup>17</sup> I will begin, however, with some thoughts, specifically for a German audience, about why systems theory need not adopt the systems approach developed by Niklas Luhmann, and how to avoid some of the pitfalls found in his work. I'll then sketch the basic claims of my view and will elaborate a bit on each (See Haslanger 2018, 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022).

I am not an expert on Luhmann's work. For an Anglophone philosophy audience, Luhmann's writings are obscure, and he has not had the same influence that he has had in Germany. Moreover, his methodology for social theory could not be further from my own. However, my understanding is that, within the critical theory tradition, the very idea of a social system is associated with Luhmann's view, and so it will be helpful to explain how his view is idiosyncratic and does not capture the field as a whole.<sup>18</sup>

Three features of Luhmann's view stand out as distinctive in relation to my work. On his view,

1. A social system is not composed of individuals, but of communications. Individuals cannot communicate and are not parts of social systems.
2. Social systems and psychic systems are independent and operationally closed.<sup>19</sup>
3. Society should be understood as a "world society" that is functionally differentiated.

For example, Luhmann claims that "the mind and communication, psychic systems and social systems, never fuse or even partially overlap, but are completely separate, self-referentially closed, autopoietic-reproductive systems. As I said: humans can't communicate." (1994, 379) And "With social systems...there

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<sup>16</sup> See Young (1980/1990, 32): "all socialist political work should be feminist in its thrust and that socialists should recognize feminist concerns as internal to their own. Likewise, socialist feminists take as a basic principle that feminist work should be anticapitalist in its thrust and should link women's situation with the phenomena of racism and imperialism. Once again, this political principle would best be served by a social theory that regards these phenomena as aspects of a single system of social relations. With such a theory we would be in a better position to argue to other feminists that they must attend to issues of class and race in their analysis and organizing."

<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that the model I am offering here is different from another common way to think about systems as causal structures. See, e.g., Dembroff (2024), Bright et al (2016), Wills (2018) and others.

<sup>18</sup> Thanks to Rahel Jaeggi for suggesting that it is important to clarify for the German audience that I do not accept Luhmann's account of social systems. Thanks to Martin Saar for asking about this in the lecture. My response to Saar was totally inadequate because my background on Luhmann was even more sketchy than it is now.

<sup>19</sup> In sometimes speaks of social systems as "operationally" closed and sometimes "referentially" closed. He allows that his sense of "closed" is different from a more common understanding according to which, as he puts it, "a closed system [is one] into which nothing can be introduced from the outside and from whose inside nothing can be removed." (2013, 28) He offers an alternative: "As I will show in more detail, the deciding factor is closure - that is, operational recursiveness, self-reference, and circularity - which has to be seen as the condition of openness." (2013, 38) He seems to have in mind that the system itself (of communications) has to be able to distinguish itself from its environment, and it does so through self-reference. I mention this but cannot explain it because it is obscure to me.

is no communication outside the communication system of society. This system is the only one employing this type of operation, and to that extent it is, as a matter of fact, necessarily closed” (1984, 34).

He claims, further,

The inclusion of all communicative behaviour into one societal system is the unavoidable consequence of functional differentiation. Using this form of differentiation, society becomes a global system. For structural reasons, there is no other choice... Modern society is, therefore, a world society in a double sense. It provides one world for one system; and it integrates all world horizons as horizons of one communicative system...A plurality of possible worlds becomes inconceivable. The world-wide communicative system constitutes one world which includes all possibilities. (1982, 132-33)

As far as I understand Luhmann’s view, neither general systems theory nor complex social systems theory entails any of these three claims; most of his account is utterly peculiar to him.<sup>20</sup> While, as Luhmann suggests, complex systems reproduce themselves without a central controlling authority and are not mechanistically determined to produce certain outcomes, one can embrace this idea without eliminating humans from the system. Moreover, complex systems are not closed, nor do they necessarily form a “world-wide communicative system” which “includes all possibilities.”

On the view I will sketch, humans and their practices are part of social systems; social systems are not closed (there is a deep interdependence between the social and the material); and not all differentiation within society should be understood functionally (in fact, some forms of differentiation are highly dysfunctional).

My own view depends on the following ideas:

1. Practices form networks of social relations.
2. Networks of social relations form social structures .
3. A system is not just a structure, but is a dynamic process.
4. A feature that distinguishes a system from its environment is co-integration of its parts; these parts are sometimes sub-systems.
5. Some dynamic systems are simple, but others are complex, i.e., they are not straightforwardly decomposable into independent parts, the operations on the parts are not necessarily linear, and they are self-organizing and stable due to feedback loops.

I’ll develop these points below.

*i) What is a social practice? How do practices form structures?*

Social practices regularize our behavior in response to each other and the world so that we can effectively communicate and coordinate.<sup>21</sup> Practices, as I understand them, are patterns of learned behavior, but

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<sup>20</sup> See also (Albert 2019).

<sup>21</sup> Other important contemporary practice theorists include Bourdieu 1977, Sewell 1992, Ortner 1984, Ortner 2006, Jaeggi 2018, Reckwitz 2002. See also Schatzki et al 2001 for an important collection of essays on practice theory.

need not be guided by rules or performed intentionally, and they allow for improvisation. However, they are not mere regularities in behavior, either, for they are the product of social learning and evolve through responsiveness both to each other's performances and the parts of the world we have an interest in collectively managing. In short, *practices are patterns of responsiveness to each other and the world, mediated by social meanings and signaling mechanisms [including the apparatus of meaning], that, at least in the primary cases, enable members of a group to communicate, coordinate, and manage things taken to have value.* I use the term “cultural technē” for the social meanings and signaling mechanisms, and “resources” (or sometimes “sources”) for what is regarded as having positive or negative value. (See Haslanger 2018, 2023; Sewell 1992.)

In other words, social practices are embodied patterns of behavior that engage the material world and other sentient beings, guided by culture. These establish social relations. The practice of teaching establishes the relation between student and teacher. The practice of parenting establishes the relation between parent and child. Such relations are embedded within other relations, and clusters of practices constitute institutions and structures.<sup>22</sup> For example, the practice of teaching involves not just a relation between teachers and students, but also between teachers and administrators, parents, the school building, and classroom supplies, and of course, especially in public schools, the state. A cluster of local practices can make up a particular school, or more broadly, a local school district; these are connected to broader clusters at the state and federal level. Networks of relations form structures.

Practices frame agency and manage interdependence. Consider food. We interpret some, but not all, edible things as food. Edible things come to have different social meanings (in some places grasshoppers are a delicacy, but elsewhere they don't even count as food; food traditions matter in celebrations and other social events). Culturally recognized edible items are easy to get in the market, we know how to cook them, and our palates adjust to them. This reinforces how cultures divide edible things into food and non-food and, in turn, the material reality of agriculture. Agricultural practices create relations between those positioned to produce, distribute, and dispose of what our culture recognizes as food and food waste.

The socio-material frame for agency in relation to food is a structure. The nodes and edges (positions and relations) in the structure are defined by the meanings and norms embedded in the cultural technē guiding the practice. For example, individuals who occupy certain nodes in a structure grow broccoli, those at other nodes sell it, those at still other nodes prepare it for eating, those at other nodes eat it, and others handle the waste. One can occupy multiple nodes, even considering this small example, and when occupying a node, one's actions are shaped by norms specifying how to relate to the broccoli and to those at other nodes.

To represent a structure is to provide the static road map that Kitano mentioned. These structures, however, are dynamic, and in the food system, subsystems of production, consumption, and disposal are tightly co-integrated and shape each other according to local and global dynamics. For example, the sub-system in the United States that harvests broccoli is shaped by race, class, and gender dynamics, and this affects other practices and other sub-systems, e.g., those harvesting broccoli are mostly migrant

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<sup>22</sup> There are many different understandings of institutions. On my view, an institution is a set of practices that prioritize rules for interaction and depend on a (formal) authority to maintain them. A university is an institution, an informal reading group is not. Not all practices or set of practices rely on rules or authorities.

laborers from Latin America, and many of them are undocumented; broccoli is harvested by hand and is physically demanding.<sup>23</sup> As a result, this particular sub-system interacts with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), systems of health care and housing for the undocumented, the education system (for the workers' children), and of course other systems of social reproduction and caregiving.

The example of food also shows how practices can have a looping effect: 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. Our interaction with a resource affects it: we grow it, shape it, distribute it, dispose of it, etc. How it responds to our actions affects our ongoing interactions with it. In cases where the practice takes hold, we shape ourselves and the resource in order to facilitate the ongoing practice. Such loops are characteristic of complex dynamic systems. (To make clear the temporal aspect, we should describe these as spirals rather than just loops. It is not a snake chasing its tail.)

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ii. *How do practices and structures relate to systems? How should we model social systems?*

If we are keen to promote social justice, it can be helpful to understand how social systems reproduce themselves. There is a temptation to think that the problem lies in hearts and minds, and we should focus on psychological interventions. I'm not denying that changing minds matters, but systems, in general, are hard to change, because they are materially and culturally structured to maintain themselves. However, systems are dynamic, and although they maintain themselves, they also evolve.

The world is full of *complex dynamic systems*, such as hearts, ant hills, weather systems, economies, and ecosystems. Key here is that complex systems spontaneously self-organize *without external intervention or central authorities*. Considering societies, we must keep in mind that no one is in charge (though of course some have much greater power than others); the system sustains itself (as long as we more or less do our part). To grasp the extent of this point, we should consider complexity a bit further.

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 on the parts are not necessarily linear, and they are self-organizing and stable due to feedback loops (Ladyman et al 2013). Key here is the idea that the different parts of the system are not independent; they depend on each other and shape each other in doing so. The evolution of the human heart affected and was responsive to the evolution of the lungs; they evolved together. And in an individual, the lungs adapt to the functioning of the heart and vice versa.

To make progress in understanding complexity, let's start with a simple example. Following Murray (1994), imagine that Suzy is leaving a bar and taking a walk; she has had too much to drink. Let's also imagine that she had tied up her dog outside the bar, but they slipped their leash while she was inside, and they are now roaming around in the same neighborhood. Each path may seem utterly random – the dog is distracted by every smell, Suzy is wandering, befuddled. However, because Suzy is the dog's

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<sup>23</sup> For an example of the job description, see: <https://seasonaljobs.dol.gov/jobs/H-300-23243-310177>

caregiver, they don't want to get too far from her, and Suzy doesn't want to get too far from the dog. When the dog barks, Suzy moves closer to the sound; when Suzy calls out, the dog adjusts its movements towards her. The relationship between the dog and Suzy 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 parts of a whole (the pair). In the case of Suzy and her dog, the two “corrected” their paths to approach each other. However, if the dog was following Suzy, but Suzy was oblivious to the dog, the dog/Suzy paths would not be co-integrated. What matters for integration is each part's dispositional responsiveness to the behavior of the other part(s). This is one way to draw the boundary between systems and their environment (which may be another system): the environment is not *co*-integrated with the system, because although the environment affects the system, the system does not have the same kind of impact on the environment, e.g., the weather can affect the trajectory of the dog and Suzy, but the dog and Suzy do not affect the weather. The dependence is not mutual; it isn't *interdependence*.

Like ecosystems, societies are made up of sub-systems that work together to sustain the whole. In order for a society to develop and maintain itself, it must find ways to accomplish certain tasks. There must be ways to manage and coordinate, among other things: food production and distribution; sex, reproduction, and childcare; education and the division of labor; health, aging, and death; shelter and defense; collective decision-making, arbitration, and leadership; leisure activities. Sub-systems are developed to accomplish these various tasks. Larger and more complex societies will also need monetary systems, transportation systems, etc. Systems may evolve in ways that can be explained only by multiple factors, including input from the environment, the interaction of multiple dynamic forces or principles, and contingent behavior of parts. Complex systems can appear chaotic because the interactions between the parts are non-linear and unpredictable. But nevertheless, the whole displays patterns and regularities.

#### **4. Social Dynamics and Cultural “Logics”**

On the account I have just sketched, social structures are networks of relations that distribute (produce, dispose of) *resources*, i.e., things taken to have (+/-) value. Some of these resources are straightforwardly material, such as food and shelter, but they also include practices that distribute more intangible resources such as knowledge, time, health, labor, citizen rights, etc. Structures provide the framework for a system (remember we might capture the structure at a time as a map), and a system adds dynamics. How should we understand these “dynamics”?

Note first that how we identify a system will depend on the question we are asking.<sup>24</sup> Systems are relevant when we are considering how an effect is produced through a process. Parts of a system and their interaction/interdependence contribute to bringing about the effect. Relevant questions to ask are *what resource* is the system managing, what parts are involved, and *which dynamics* are responsible for the co-

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<sup>24</sup> See Garfinkel 1990, Cummins 1975. Thanks to Hohan Kim and Katharine Jenkins for helping me clarify this point.

integration of parts that enables it to sustain itself and evolve.<sup>25</sup> The dynamics are the principles that explain the process. In the case of ecosystems we may look at fluid dynamics; in a protein, chemical dynamics. For example, if we are interested in how blood is oxygenated, we will focus on the circulatory system, the heart and lungs, and the ways they interact to distribute oxygen through the body. If we are interested how an infant is calmed, we may also be interested in a caretaker's heart and lungs, but rather than focusing on their role in oxygenation, the relevant features are the rhythmic sounds of the heartbeat and breathing when the baby lies on their chest. The heart and lungs can be part of a system that manages the resource of oxygen or calmness, and the dynamics may be chemical or auditory/psychological. But what are the relevant dynamics in social systems?

Return, for the moment, to the debate over single- and dual- (or triple-) systems theory. As I mentioned, not all socialist feminists or critical race theorists adopt a dual- or triple-system model of our current social formation. Single-system theorists, however, tend to think that there must be a single dynamic that explains the system's workings, and the most common suggestion is that the system evolves according to a "capitalist logic."<sup>26</sup> The capitalist logic shapes not only production, but expropriation, social reproduction, environmental degradation, and undemocratic politics.

But why assume there is only one dynamic, or one "logic"<sup>27</sup> in our current social formation? In the context of organizational theory, institutional logics "provide a link between individual agency and cognition and socially constructed institutional practices and rule structures." (Thornton & Ocasio 2008, 101) They may be implicit or explicit in the institutional setting, and set norms for behavior, give agents reasons for acting, resources for justification, and provide actors "with vocabularies of motive and a sense of self (i.e., identity)." (Thornton & Ocasio 2008, 101) I take logics to be part of the cultural technē. However,

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<sup>25</sup> In some cases we would want a more fine-grained individuation that also depends on the kinds of relations that make up the network, e.g., different political systems distribute power and basic goods through different (democratic, authoritarian, monarchical) relations. It isn't clear to me whether we need to specify these relations independently or whether they emerge from the particular interaction between the material resources and dynamics. My sense is that this will depend on how culture functions in the model.

<sup>26</sup> It is never quite clear (to me) how to characterize precisely the capitalist logic, but it is not crucial to specify it in detail here. The basic idea is that in the pursuit of profit, which is essential to capitalism, expropriation and exploitation are inevitable. Is this "logic" part of culture? Does it depend on social meanings? What are the other economic (and other) dynamics that maintain it and explain its evolution?

<sup>27</sup> Fraser would seem to agree? She says, "The picture we developed in the previous chapter included the idea that different elements of the capitalist order have their own normativities and social ontologies. And that implies the possibility of "relatively autonomous" developments that are not mere "reflections" of economic or technological developments, even though they may be affected by the latter – but also vice versa." (Fraser & Jaeggi 2018, 67) However, at other points she is keen to emphasize the controlling power of capitalism or the "capitalist logic." For example, just shortly after in that same text, she says (also quoted in this text above), "[Weber and Habermas] hold that capitalist society encompasses a plurality of "value spheres," each of which has its own "inner logic" of development. My view is akin to that idea, but it differs in a crucial respect: for me the "spheres" in question are not natural kinds but artifacts of capitalism. Each of them gets its distinctive quality (its normativity, its social ontology) from the position it occupies in the larger institutional structure – from the way it is set apart from, and made to contrast with, the other constitutive elements of that structure, including the capitalist economy." (Fraser & Jaeggi 2018, 68) Jaeggi, in contrast, seems more comfortable with multiple dynamics.

The institutional logics approach views any context as potentially influenced by contending logics of different societal sectors. For example, the health care field is shaped by the institutional logics of the market, the logic of the democratic state, and the professional logic of medical care. (Thornton & Ocasio 2008, 104)

So one source of complexity in systems is the interaction between different dynamics embedded in culture. So understanding the dynamics of a social system will also require attention to “logics” beyond capitalism.<sup>28</sup> To do this, we should start to identify different *kinds* of logics.

First, there are semiotic dynamics within culture. William Sewell, Jr. (2005) makes this point:

...culture has a semiotic structuring principle that is different from the political, economic, or geographical structuring principles that also inform practice. Hence, even if an action were almost entirely determined by, say, overwhelming disparities in economic resources, those disparities would still have to be rendered meaningful in action according to a semiotic logic – that is, in language or in some other form of symbols. (2005, 48)

Semiotic logics form broad ranging nets that take highly contingent forms, e.g.,

...the network of semiotic relations that make up culture is not isomorphic with the network of economic, political, geographical, social, or demographic relations that make up what we usually call a "society." A given symbol – mother, red, polyester, liberty, wage labor, or dirt – is likely to show up not only in many different locations in a particular institutional domain (motherhood in millions of families) but in a variety of different institutional domains as well (welfare mothers as a potent political symbol, the mother tongue in linguistic quarrels, the Mother of God in the Catholic Church). Culture may be thought of as a network of semiotic relations cast across society, a network with a different shape and different spatiality than institutional, or economic, or political networks. The meaning of a symbol in a given context may therefore be subject to redefinition by dynamics entirely foreign to that institutional domain or spatial location... (2005, 49)

Because resources are interpreted *as such* through a frame of social meanings, the same “thing” may serve as a resource within and be managed by different sub-systems. For example, as school may be part of an educational system, but also a health care system (school nurses are a front line in monitoring child health and safety), a criminal justice system (school staff are mandated reporters and increasingly security guards monitor schools for criminal activity), and a real estate system (housing prices reflect neighborhood school quality). Another way to put this is that systems do not necessarily “saturate” a social space (Walby 2007).

Nevertheless, systems that overlap sometimes co-integrate. Two recent examples of co-integration include the criminal justice system’s co-integration with the immigration system (sometimes called “crimmigration”) and with the foster care system. Mendoza (2020) characterizes crimmigration:

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<sup>28</sup> Note that there is a bit of a shift in Sewell here: I would think that the cultural *technē* includes a “capitalist logic,” i.e., that the economic domain is, in part, cultural. But Sewell wants to separate culture from “economic, political, geographical, social, or demographic relations.” This suggests that economic dynamics, in addition to the cultural or semiotic “logic” of the economy, are relevant to explaining the economic system. For example, the ideology of capitalism is not the only thing that matters in explaining how the economic system evolves.

Crimmigration is a term used by migration scholars to refer to three areas in which criminal law enforcement and immigration law enforcement are problematically conflated. The first is when criminal convictions come to have immigration consequences, such as a revocation of a visa or green card. The second is when immigration law violations come to have criminal-style punishments. The third is when the tactics sanctioned for criminal law enforcement are commandeered for the purposes of performing immigration enforcement or vice versa. (2020, 2)

And Dorothy Roberts has documented, in detail, the co-integration of child protective services (CPS) and criminal justice:

The symbiotic relationship between law enforcement and child welfare agencies systematically buttresses a police state in Black communities by triggering investigations into family life, reinforcing family surveillance with armed might, and threatening families with both prison and child removal. (2022, 205)

Poverty, because it is correlated with difficulty in providing for a child's basic needs, itself is considered a basis for child removal (Roberts 2022, 30). CPS investigates Black homes almost twice as often as White homes, and in some urban areas, 72% of Black children have been investigated.<sup>29</sup> (My children are Black, and I, personally, have been reported and investigated more than once.) Moreover, foster care alumni are at high risk for involvement with the criminal justice system. A recent report claims that “one quarter of foster care alumni will become involved with the criminal justice system within two years of leaving care... The foster care-to-prison pipeline particularly affects youth of color, LGBTQ-identified youth, and young people with mental illnesses”<sup>30</sup> Of course involvement with the criminal justice system affects one's employment options and life prospects, generally. Moreover, mothers, especially single mothers, are vulnerable, being the ones most often responsible for children.

In these examples, family relations are managed, and citizenship rights and freedom are curtailed through practices that rely on gendered, racialized and ethno/national social meanings. These practices, in turn, produce deep economic and civil marginalization.

It would be hard, I think, to make the case that in these social formations, patriarchy, White supremacy, and capitalism (or any two of them) are functioning as autonomous systems. (See also Haslanger 2020.) First, subjectivation occurs at the meso-level. In the examples, just described, the practices and institutions that intervene in people's lives and subjectivize agents are criminal justice, immigration, and Child Protective Services (CPS). On my account, these each involve a variety of practices that form the co-integrated sub-systems, which, in turn, form a single complex system with looping effects. Of course, these sub-systems work as part of the broader social formation (including many other material systems), but it would be a mistake to call the whole either capitalism, White supremacy, or patriarchy, because *its* dynamics involve them all, and more.

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<sup>29</sup> Roberts (2022, 45). “more than half of Black children (53 percent) are subjected to a CPS investigation at some point during their childhoods — almost twice the lifetime prevalence for white children (28.2 percent). A 2021 study that focused on data from America's largest counties revealed even higher rates of investigation in some urban areas. For example, the study estimated that 72 percent of Black children in Los Angeles County will endure a CPS investigation during the course of their childhoods.”

<sup>30</sup> Juvenile Law Center (2018) <https://jlc.org/news/what-foster-care-prison-pipeline>

Second, the semiotics activated *in these practices* are not generic logics of race, gender, and class. The relevant symbolic frame that guides agency is more fine-grained than that. There are social meanings for BLACK MOTHERS, MEXICAN WORKERS, POOR CHILDREN OF COLOR, and these are not just conjunctions of the meaning of BLACK and MOTHER or MEXICAN and WORKER. (To put it another way, not all social semiotics has a compositional semantics.) The meaningful categories and the dynamics that interact to explain the evolution of the system are local, concrete and specific.<sup>31</sup>

This supports my earlier claim that categories such as genders, races, classes, are, at best, abstractions from the actual group formations. For example, gender is not a node in a structure at the meso-level. Particular nodes may be *gendered*, e.g., male immigrants are viewed and treated differently than female immigrants. The immigration system does not have a way of attaching meaning to women, as such; it attaches meaning to more complicated and fine-grained groups. Immigrants from particular countries, of different ethnicities, with different wealth, are treated vastly differently, and these differences are as analytically significant (or more so) as sex/gender.<sup>32</sup>

This model also provides resources to say that our current social formation is sexist, racist, and capitalist, i.e., it is producing hierarchies in which non-cis-men, non-whites, and non-capitalists are systematically disadvantaged.<sup>33</sup> This is due to the social meanings that mark individuals for their roles in a broad system of coordination. Skin color, accent, eye shape, appearance of secondary sex characteristics, and such, all have social meaning. The practices in our current social formation do not just pick up on sex markings or “color” markings alone, but on combinations of them. Perhaps less obviously, class is also marked on the body: class categorization in our current social formation relies significantly on racialization, and also accent, style, and other conventional markers. If we extend the notion of class beyond the wage workers and capitalists, then sex/gender is also a (rough) class marker, for those who engage in the labor of social

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<sup>31</sup> It is important to note that not all compound terms are compositional, i.e., their meaning is not simply a combination of the independent meaning of terms in the compound. (For a non-technical review of the phenomenon, in various European languages, see Schlücker 2019.) More specifically, there is an important distinction between attributive and predicative uses of adjectives (Rind & Tillinghast 2008). Consider ‘red ball.’ If I say that something is a red ball, one can infer that it is red, and it is a ball. However, consider ‘tennis shoe’ or ‘white wine.’ One cannot infer from the claim that something is white wine that it is white and it is wine. The term ‘white’ shifts its semantic value depending on what it is modifying (wine or paint, for example). This suggests that we should not assume that the terms used in an expression are semantically “prior to” the expression as a whole and the compound expression combines them. What it is for someone to be Black, or to be a mother, is contested, and may itself derive from paradigms in the context at hand. See also Lakoff 1999.

<sup>32</sup> My view is importantly similar to the account provided by Jorba and Rodó-Zárate (2019). On their view, as on the approach I’m developing here, it is helpful to think of gender and race as properties of groups, more perspicuously, of social groups as being gendered or raced in different ways within different contexts, and not be at other times and places. They say: “two main desiderata for intersectionality theory: the need to account for complex and deep ways in which social categories interact, and the need to maintain ontological specificity. We have argued that [additive and mutual constitution models] cannot accommodate both desiderata because of an implicit conceptualization common to [them]: the reification problem. This problem rests on the fact that authors tend to implicitly conceive of categories as objects (broadly construed) and not as properties. Once we reject reification in this sense, we can conceptualize categories as properties—of an individual and of a system. The properties framework paves the way for us to see the interaction among categories as producing the emergence of a new entity (the experience or system, respectively) with a certain overall character, which cannot be predicted a priori from the behavior of the single categories involved.”

<sup>33</sup> See also Jorba and Rodó-Zárate (2019): “The shift in conceptualization proposed here presents a framework that considers systems as “adjectives” and not as “nouns.” That is, the whole system of power is patriarchal, capitalist, and racist—these three properties are its features.” See also Haslanger 2020.

reproduction are mostly women. In other words, “controlling images” (Collins 1990) and associated norms mark individuals for certain roles. Gender is one dimension of the resulting category of, say, Black motherhood – perhaps because (assumed) sex is a relevant marker; race is another dimension of the category – perhaps because features associated with relatively recent ancestry in Africa are also relevant. But this is to say that gendering and racialization are part of what the system does, not what the system is.

If we are to generalize from this, then patriarchy, White supremacy, and capitalism are not separate systems. Gender and race are not resources to be managed. They emerge when the management of resources involves categorizing individuals to fulfill different roles in the structure, and for any number of reasons, sex, “color,”<sup>34</sup> or other forms of vulnerability, are or become salient ways, among others, of marking difference (O’Connor 2019). Semiotic logics provide markers and categories (of people and things) and norms that guide apt responses (protect the dependent at all costs!). Economic logics, political logics, sexual logics, caregiving logics, (etc.) interact and evolve in response to each other and the system’s environment. The idea that there is a “logic of capitalism” that is running the show is insensitive, as Young suggested, to the complexity of social dynamics. Should we say, nevertheless, that capitalism, understood as our “institutionalized social order,, is the current overarching social system? Although it is possible to treat capitalism as a combination of social, political, and economic logics, it strikes me as overreach to prioritize capitalism in this way.<sup>35</sup> The “logic” of capital may have a broad reach and it may be that any adequate explanation of the dynamics of our social formation must take it into account. But I would say the same of the logics of gender and race.

## 5. Conclusion and Preview: Social Change

I suggested that this understanding of social systems is relevant for thinking about social critique and social change. Let me say a bit about that now.

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<sup>34</sup> In previous work (2000), I have spoken of “color” (in scare quotes) for the markers of race, which are historically and culturally variable. In the current United States, skin color, hair color and texture, eye shape, nose shape, and such are included in “color.”

<sup>35</sup> Berman (2022, 140) disagrees. He says, “...while Haslanger’s second contention is that “capitalism is not the ‘engine of history’ because ‘[s]ocieties all face the challenge of solving multiple coordination problems, where the problems and their possible solutions pull us in different directions,’ from a Marxian perspective, capitalism is the closest thing we can identify to an “engine of history” insofar as it is an abstract mediating meta-schema that constrains the organization of responses to use-value defined concrete coordination problems.” (internal quote from Haslanger 2020, 7) He develops the argument later: “My claim is that capitalism, as a historically actualized form of the organization of socio-natural metabolism contains systematic imperatives that constrain patterned social practice in ways that produce social distinctions constitutive of differential race and gender hierarchies and further, that it is by means of the unique mode of social mediation characteristic of capitalist societies that the social compulsion of racial and gendered domination is reproduced today.” (2022 143) Although I cannot go into detail here, my concern is that there is an ongoing slippage in Berman and Fraser about the relationship between White supremacy and capitalism (and for that matter, whether capitalism is in every use of the term the whole institutionalized social order, or is a narrower phenomenon such as the economy). Surely race and gender technēs “contains systematic imperatives that constrain patterned social practice” that shape capital also, so it would seem that the constraint goes both ways. The implicit response seems to be that gender and race are produced by capitalism, and so capitalist constraints are the driver. But this begs the question.

Because we live in *social systems*, and these systems have dynamics that both outstrip and recruit our agency, we need to get a feel for the big picture and watch for ways that our efforts at social change will be frustrated or even co-opted within the system. However, at the same time, the problems we face as individuals, and the sites where we are likely to have impact, are local and within the institutions we navigate on a regular basis. Through participation in social practices we gain knowledge of how they work, what sustains them, what makes them valuable, and what alternative options are feasible.

Both of these sources of knowledge – broad theory and embedded agency – are important for effective social intervention, but only if they inform each other. (This is probably the message of the bumper sticker “Think globally, act locally” – but I would want an adjustment so it doesn’t seem like acting locally is just an application of the global principles or strategies we have figured out. Less catchy but more promising, I think, would be “Act locally, think globally, adjust local action, rethink global strategy...” – though some might want to start with thinking rather than action. LOL.)

The model I’ve sketched for understanding social systems locates their grip on us through social practices. We are recruited into these practices and they become habitual, but they are also essential for social life. In order to be intelligible to others, in order to coordinate to get our basic needs met, in order to avoid repressive and coercive pressure, we need to conform to them, at least to some non-trivial extent. And we can rarely sort out the (full) consequences of our participation, for what we do far exceeds our knowledge or intentions. But we can see what happens locally when we start to do things differently, when we act together to challenge the logics of gender or race or disability. This is where we can begin to live differently and create new forms of value.

The first impulse to change arises in resistance to the practices that shape our lives and the lives of those we care about; once we see how the practices that damage us are more broadly damaging, and how difficult it is to change them, the need for a global perspective becomes pressing. But the fact remains that our agency occurs and is constrained locally, and this is where we have to find ways to resist. If I am urged to resist financialized capitalism, or White supremacy, it is not clear what my next steps should be. This is the kind of paralysis that I think Young had in mind when she worried that taking aim at patriarchy, as a system, was not a good political tactic, because an individual seems to be so powerless against a foe so “ancient and monolithic” (see fn 8).

But the problem is not just paralysis, if we begin with theory. Nancy Fraser asks,

Can we envision an emancipatory, counterhegemonic project of eco-societal transformation of sufficient breadth and vision to coordinate the struggles of multiple social movements, political parties, labor unions, and other collective actors—a project aimed at laying the cannibal to rest once and for all? In the current conjuncture, I argue here, nothing short of such a project can avail. (Fraser 2022, xvii)

I want to know, who is the ‘we’ here? Who is envisioning the project? In this case, the ‘we’ seems to be a group of theorists who primarily focus on the dynamics of capital, failing to appreciate how a system with multiple dynamics can be resisted along multiple axes, all of which will be necessary for social change that addresses the depths of the dynamics of gender, race, ethnicity, and disability. These are dynamics that preceded capitalism and although they are now integrated into it, there is no reason to think that

undermining capitalism – or displacing the capitalist logic of our current system – will make them go away.

I suggest that when we imagine a social movement, or “project,” that seeks social change at the broadest scale, it is either going to fail to be actionable, or it is going to lose touch with the knowledge gained locally and its radical potential. For example, Fraser’s description of the project she is envisioning seems to dismiss a huge number of efforts to intervene in the current social order:

That romantic view [i.e., one that isn’t entirely focused on the capitalist dynamics of the social order] is held today by a fair number of anti-capitalist thinkers and leftwing activists, including cultural feminists, deep ecologists and neo-anarchists, as well as by many proponents of ‘plural’, ‘post-growth’, ‘solidary’, and ‘popular’ economies. Too often, these currents treat ‘care’, ‘nature’, ‘direct action’ or ‘commoning’ as intrinsically anti-capitalist. As a result, they overlook the fact that their favourite practices are not only sources of critique but also integral parts of the capitalist order. Rather, the argument here is that society, polity and nature arose concurrently with economy and developed in symbiosis with it. (Fraser 2017, 155-156)

...[such projects] usually end up recycling capitalist stereotypes, as they counterpose female nurturance to male aggression, spontaneous cooperation to economic calculation, nature’s holistic organicism to anthropocentric individualism. To premise one’s struggles on these oppositions is not to challenge, but unwittingly to reflect, the institutionalized social order of capitalist society. (Fraser 2017, 156)

This, I think, misunderstands the power of organizing. Transformative social movements depend on micro-interventions that are responsive to the needs of individuals and their values, and build upon those relationships to change practices, social relations, and networks (Heydari Fard 2022, 2024). This is not romanticism. It is essential to movement work.<sup>36</sup> Not all of our immediate needs or struggles will be addressed by challenging capitalism; and some ways of meeting our needs will have profound effects on the broader system and its capitalist dynamics.

Dean Spade (2020) argues that separating political activism from ordinary life is “demobilizing” and “keeps us passive and complicit.” (27) Instead,

Left social movements have two big jobs right now. First, we need to organize to help people survive the devastating conditions unfolding every day. Second, we need to mobilize hundreds of millions of people for resistance so we can tackle the underlying causes of these crises... The way to tackle these two big tasks—meeting people’s needs and mobilizing them for resistance—is to create mutual aid projects and get lots of people to participate in them. Social movements that have built power and won major change have all included mutual aid, yet it is often a part of movement work that is

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<sup>36</sup> “We argue that all the aspects of our lives—where and how we live and work, eat, entertain ourselves, get around, and get by are sites of injustice and potential resistance. At our best, social movements create vibrant social networks in which we not only do work in a group, but also have friendships, make art, have sex, mentor and parent kids, feed ourselves and each other, build radical land and housing experiments, and inspire each other about how we can cultivate liberation in all aspects of our lives. Activism and mutual aid shouldn’t feel like volunteering or like a hobby—it should feel like living in alignment with our hopes for the world and with our passions. It should enliven us.” (Spade 2020, 27)

less visible and less valued. In this moment, our ability to build mutual aid will determine whether we win the world we long for or dive further into crisis.” (Spade 2020, 2-3)

We need to decide the direction of our efforts, together, in community. And we need to set our priorities. What is valuable in a context depends on what is available to be valued and frames of social meaning we have to make sense of it. But change can happen – change of values, change of meaning, and change of structures – as we engage in social practices differently. This, I believe, is the point of Antonio Machado’s claim, “We make the path by walking.” (*se hace camino al andar*).<sup>37</sup> In creating new ways of life, moving past the well-trod ground matters, even if we are not sure where we are going. In this sense, we are agents of possibility. I’m not denying that we also need theoretical tools to avoid cooptation and backsliding. As I said at the start, of this lecture, we need to attend to both the micro and the macro. But the meso level, the level of practices, is a space where contextual knowledge and the solidarity can enable transformative change. And in the next lecture, I’ll develop this idea.

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<sup>37</sup> From “Proverbios y Cantares” in *Campos de Castilla* (1912). See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio\\_Machado](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio_Machado) As I understand it, Maya Angelou’s thought that “we find our path by walking it,” has a different sense, for she was claiming that individually, we find who we each are by exercising our agency. (Quoted by Tavis Smiley in *My Journey with Maya*. p. 211) This is a different, though related, point.

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