

Conversations in Philosophy, Law, and Politics

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Social Systems and Intersectional Oppression

Sally Haslanger

1. Introduction

Contemporary social philosophy is especially concerned with the issue of oppression and social justice. Examples include class injustice, racism, sexism, gender oppression, heteronormativity, ableism, ageism, fat oppression, (human) speciesism, and others.¹ To be oppressed is not simply to endure expressions of hatred or to be the target of wrongful actions by individuals. It is to suffer systemic and structural injustice. Iris Marion Young (1990), for example, argues that oppression is systemic group-based injustice that has what she calls “five faces”: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and systematic violence. So to suffer racism, for example, is for (non-White) racial groups to suffer some combination of these forms of injustice.²

To understand the faces of oppression and their interconnections, it helps to have an account that illuminates the systemic and structural interdependence between material conditions, ideology, and agency. It is also important to understand what it might mean for oppression to be, as Young suggests, ‘group-based.’ Notice, that in the examples above, the different kinds of oppression are identified in terms of groups: classes, races, sexes, genders, the disabled, the elderly, etc. What links the various forms of injustice with the group in question? For example, are groups explicitly targeted by those who have power to shape the structures? Or is it enough that the group happens to be positionally vulnerable? What sorts of things are these groups, e.g. are just collections of people? How are such social groups constituted? And importantly, how are the various groups and the different forms of oppression related? In other words, how do we make sense of the

¹ Note that the term ‘fat’ has been reclaimed by theorists and activists working on size, weight, and appearance oppression. See, for example, the journal *Fat Studies*: <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/ufts20>. I use the term in the reclaimed sense.

² Whether all the wrongs of oppression are forms of injustice depends on one’s understanding of justice. Young sometimes suggests she is working with a capability approach: “In the most general sense, all oppressed people suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings” (Young, 1990, p. 40).

distinctive forms of oppression that affect individuals in multiple groups? This last question is the problem of intersectionality.³

Critical social theorists and activists have been concerned with intersectionality for decades. It emerges, I think, from the very idea that oppression is a form of group-based injustice.⁴ Let me start with a simplified case to motivate the problem.⁵ If you think that the relevant group in sexist oppression is, say, *women*, then it would seem that there should be a kind of oppression that affects all and only women *as such*. The problem is that women don't all suffer the same sort of oppression. For example, Black women and Asian women are not oppressed, even 'as women,' in the same way. Rich women and poor women, disabled women and able-bodied women, cis-women and trans-women, all suffer distinct forms of oppression 'as women.' And, of course, this point can be extended: not all Asian women are oppressed in the same way (some are rich, some are poor; some are affected by Japanese gender norms, others Indian gender norms, ...). In other words, the forms of oppression don't easily match up with the broad categories that that are supposed to define their object. So feminists (and others) seem to face a challenge: either we find a distinctive form of sex/gender oppression shared by all and only those in the group women, or we allow that there isn't a substantive sense in which women, as a group, suffer oppression, *as women*. (*Mutatis mutandis* for other social justice efforts in the name of a broad group.)

One strategy for addressing this question is to postulate several broad systems: White supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, etc., and explain fine-grained intersectional forms of oppression through the interconnection (either causal interaction or overlap) of these systems. This seems to address the challenge. Feminists, for example, could claim that there is a system that oppresses women *as women*, namely patriarchy, even if patriarchy is always realized in conjunction with other forms of oppression. Anti-racists could claim that there is a system that oppresses non-White people, *as non-White*, namely White Supremacy, even if it is always realized in conjunction with other forms of oppression.

³ There is an overwhelming amount of literature on intersectionality (both using that term and prior to Crenshaw's (1989) introduction of the term). Dembroff includes a good sample in the references in Chapter 21. I would also add McCall (2005) and its bibliography. Socialist feminists have been discussing the relationship between systems such as patriarchy, White supremacy, and capitalism for decades. See, for example, Young (1980/1990), Arruzza (2015a, 2015b), Oksala et al. (2015), Wills (2018).

⁴ There is a considerable literature in Black Feminism that criticizes some uses of the idea of intersectionality in Women's and Gender Studies (and elsewhere). One worry is that by appropriating and mainstreaming the idea, its radical meaning has been lost and Black feminists' insights have been appropriated. See, for example, Alexander-Floyd (2012), Bilge (2013, 2020), Bliss (2016), Harris and Patton (2019). I only read these texts after I submitted this chapter and thank Kristie Dotson for pointing them out to me. I am sympathetic to some of these critiques, and, as will become clear, I reject one of the mainstream readings of structural intersectionality. But the issues deserve deeper engagement than I will offer here.

⁵ The case is simplified because I'm assuming for the moment that sexism (or patriarchy) targets *women*, even though patriarchal systems harm everyone.

In Chapter 21, ‘Intersection Is Not Identity, or How to Distinguish Overlapping Systems of Injustice,’ Robin Dembroff develops this approach in a sophisticated and compelling way by considering how the systems of patriarchy and White supremacy *overlap* to produce distinctive forms of injustice. Dembroff argues that patriarchy and White supremacy are systems properly individuated by reference to their essential ideologies. They say:

Th[e] process of reproducing ideology, in my view, is what we mean when we talk about a ‘system of injustice.’ A system of injustice *just is* the process of continuously reproducing a particular ideology. By distinguishing between coincident ideologies, we can distinguish between coincident processes of reproducing those ideologies. By distinguishing between coincident processes of reproducing ideology, we distinguish between coincident systems of injustice.

(Chapter 21, p. 385)

I see the appeal of this approach, but I don’t find it adequate for my purposes. Dembroff and I are asking different questions and are working within different social theories with different accounts of systemic and structural injustice. My aim in this chapter is not to challenge Dembroff’s view, but to introduce an alternative model and explore where and how our views differ.

On the view I will defend, society is a complex dynamic system composed of functionally individuated material sub-systems such as health care systems, transportation systems, education systems, monetary systems, political systems, and the like.⁶ The co-integration of these functional systems, rather than patriarchy, White Supremacy, or capitalism, makes up the complex dynamic system that is our current social formation.⁷ The functional systems (and the social formation as a whole) are *patriarchal*, *White supremacist*, *capitalist*, *eugenicist*, etc., but the systems are not individuated by their ideologies.

⁶ I speak of ‘functional’ systems (and sometimes ‘material’ systems) to distinguish, e.g. a health care system from, say, patriarchy, even though one might argue that patriarchy is both functional and material. It is hard to capture the difference I have in mind, but the key point is that the systems I have in mind are not (contrary to Dembroff) individuated by their ideologies, but are individuated by the resource they distribute and/or how they function as part of the broader system. So, for example, a heart is a subsystem of the body that is individuated by its function of distributing oxygen through the blood. This account doesn’t presuppose that every social system has an etiological function; I assume only “systems functions” or what are sometimes called “Cummins functions” (Cummins, 1975; Millikan, 1989; Haslanger, 2020b). Sometimes the individuation is more focused on the particular resource managed and sometimes on the function in relation to the whole.

⁷ Note that it is inadequate to discuss White supremacy without linking it to colonialism, and in the United States, settler colonialism. An explanation of our current social formation must include attention to settler colonialism, given that it continues and is an important factor in ongoing oppression. A fuller analysis of this is warranted. I regret that I wasn’t able to include it here. Thanks to Nora Berenstain for her input on this.

How does ideology play a role, then? I'll say more below about my conception of ideology as a cultural technē and how it seems to differ from Dembroff's conception. However, it is worth sketching my alternative picture briefly. Complex systems are self-reproducing, but are also dynamic: they change and evolve, sometimes for better, other times for worse. To explain the dynamics of a social system, we need to look at different factors that affect how it evolves; on my view, such factors include the changing material conditions, the capacities and dispositions of agents, and the cultural technē (including cultural "logics") that make agency within the system possible and intelligible. I have argued that a cultural technē is ideological (roughly) when it produces and sustains oppression. On Dembroff's view, social systems are individuated by their essential ideology: patriarchy, White supremacy, and capitalism are *systems* with distinctive essential logics that overlap in processes that yield intersectional outcomes. In contrast, on my view, such ideologies or logics are *dynamics* at work in all of the material sub-systems and are not themselves systems or individuating conditions of systems.

So, for example, a particular transportation system may be classist, racist, and ableist because it serves the wealthy, White, and able-bodied, and underserves the rest. But the particular transportation system isn't individuated by the particular classist, racist, and ableist dynamics that govern it at a particular time, i.e., those ideologies are not essential to it. The MBTA (Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority) could persist while becoming less ableist, for example, if more elevators were installed, the buses and trains were more easily boarded by wheelchairs, more signs were provided in Braille, special announcements were projected visibly. An ideal form of the MBTA could even be non-ableist. The system is not currently evolving to be more accessible, in part, due to the logic of eugenics; though the logics of capitalism, White supremacy, and patriarchy also play a role in how the system evolves (or doesn't). Moreover, the logics are not static, but evolve along with the system.

Individuals are positioned in multiple material systems—they participate in health care systems, education systems, family systems, transportation systems, and have jobs that position them within a variety of other specific systems. Our positioning in such systems constitutes us as social subjects. We are not gendered or raced prior to our participation in the practices these systems organize; the practices produce the kinds of social individuals who can perform them. No practice or system produces gender, *as such*, or race, *as such*, or even class, *as such*. It produces a very particular kind of agent that engages in local educational, vocational, or familial practices. We can find, however, that there are patterns in the kinds of agents produced, and these patterns can be sorted by gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, etc. (See also Bernstein, 2020.) These patterns are caused by complex dynamics involving agency, culture, and material conditions within functional systems. Because subjects are constituted through complex social processes that are patterned in ways that gender them, racialize them,

and disable them, intersectionality is not a matter of combining what is pre-constituted. Gender, race, and such are patterns in subjectivation that emerge due to the dynamics of the co-integrated material systems.

Both Dembroff and I are interested in societal reproduction—how societies reproduce themselves and maintain oppression.⁸ We are both interested in intersectionality. And we agree that structural intersectionality is not best understood in terms of the causal interaction between patriarchy, White supremacy, capitalism. It may be that we agree on almost everything, but just use different terminology to express our views. I do think, however, that there are some differences, and in what follows, I'll aim to identify the differences, and indicate what may be at stake.

In Section 2, I provide some background on my approach to practices and structures.⁹ In Section 3, I turn to the question of what constitutes a social group for the purposes of understanding oppression. In Section 4, I consider an historical case study, described in depth in work by Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992), of the intersectionality of gender, race, and class, in the division of reproductive labor in the early to mid-twentieth century. In Section 5, I consider how we might apply Dembroff's analysis of intersectionality to the case. Given some of the questions I raise about Dembroff's model, I offer a different model that resists treating patriarchy, White supremacy, capitalism (and other broad forms of oppression) as separate systems. Section 6 wraps things up.

2. Practices, Structures, and Systems

Social practices regularize our behavior in response to each other and the world so that we can effectively communicate and coordinate. Practices, as I understand them, are patterns of learned behavior, but 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 effect, practices are patterns of responsiveness to each other and the world, mediated by social meanings and signaling mechanisms (including the apparatus of meaning), that 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

⁸ The term 'social reproduction,' in the most general sense, refers to the processes by which societies, or social formations, reproduce themselves over time (Wright, 2010, p. 17). Socialist feminists use the term more narrowly to refer to the production of social agents. I will follow the socialist feminist usage in distinguishing *societal* reproduction from the more specific *social* reproduction.

⁹ In Section 2, I draw on material I've published elsewhere, including 'Systemic and Structural Injustice: What's the Difference?' (Haslanger, 2023).

signaling mechanisms, and “resources” (or “sources”) for what is regarded as having positive or negative value. (See Sewell, 1992; Haslanger, 2018, 2023.) What and how we value are mediated by the cultural *technē* which transforms (kinds of) things into resources with respect to a cultural context. A cultural *technē* is ideological to the extent that it manages oppressive practices.

Games, such as chess, are sometimes 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 are conditioned by multiple factors: physical, geographical, biological, economic, political, legal, cultural, and semiotic, to name but a few, and improvisation is central to navigating them (Bertinetto and Bertram, 2020). Nevertheless, consider the rook in chess: it can be any object, but its status as rook is defined by a set of permissible move relationships (we might say, such rules constitute the “logic” of chess). These are not causal relations. In a particular game (thinking of it as a process or extended event), the object assigned to be a rook occupies a space on the board and its options are set by the current placement of the other pieces and which rook moves are allowed. The permissible moves are like vectors and, in a particular game, there will be a dynamics that make some moves more likely than others. Analogously (though over-simplified), as a parent, one has certain rights, responsibilities, and normative expectations with respect to their minor children—think of these as the possible and obligatory moves available, a “logic” of parenting, if you will, like the “logic” of chess.¹⁰ In a particular dynamic system (a family, situated in a particular social context), however, the moves available to a parent at any time depend on many factors, including the rights and responsibilities they have as parent and possibly spouse (what I just called a “logic”), but also the details of their particular relationships to others in the family and the multiple other physical and social factors that constrain their choices. Just as in a particular game, a chess player is limited by the rules of chess about how to move their rook, they are also both constrained and enabled by the material conditions and agency of others involved, e.g. the set-up of the board and pieces (are the pieces small? is it hard to determine which are rooks? are they hard to pick up?), the condition of their opponent (are they just learning the game? have they had too much to drink?). Both a chess player and a parent have autonomy over their choices, given their options. However, depending on the situation, including the values and conditions of the interacting parties, there will be a dynamics that create patterns even against the background of the “logics” and other constraints; yet, of course, autonomy is consistent with some choices being more likely than others.

¹⁰ For a helpful survey on institutional logics, see Thornton and Ocasio (2008).

I often use the example of food production to illustrate the idea of a cultural *technē*. We interpret some, but not all, edible things as food. Edible things come to have different social meanings (around here we don't consider grasshoppers to be food, but elsewhere they are a special treat). The cultural *technē* is a toolbox of social meanings that we draw on to interpret and respond to the world, in this case, in terms of what is appropriate to eat. Agricultural practices produce, distribute, and dispose of what our culture recognizes as food (and food waste). These items are easy to find in the market, we know how to cook them, and our palates adjust to them. And this reinforces how cultures divide edible things into food and non-food and, in turn, the material reality of agriculture.

It is important to note, however, that social practices also shape social agents, e.g. we are shaped as consumers of food by (among other things) what we grew up eating and what is available. This process is sometimes called subjectivation or interpellation (Althusser, 1971/2014; Haslanger, 2019). We often come not only to develop the skills to participate in the practices in question fluently, but also identify with them, e.g. as farmer, as cook, as sommelier, as consumer. We become the social agents we are, more generally, by participating in the network of practices available in our social milieu.

An unjust social practice, or structure, might fail to provide us the semiotic tools to interpret and value things aptly (not everything we eat is properly considered food), or it might organize us around what's valuable (or not) in unjust ways, for example, by distributing it unfairly. But because social practices don't just represent reality, but also act on it and shape it to conform to our practices, the fit between practice and world can appear natural and good, even when it isn't. This is how a cultural *technē* becomes ideological. Not only is the practice a problem, but so is the world it has produced. This can make it difficult to even imagine intervening in a way that disrupts the system and limits our options for escaping it.¹¹

On my account, a network of social practices forms a social structure, e.g. the structure of industrial agriculture in the United States, and the structure is the skeleton of a system. It can be helpful to think of systems as dynamic processes. A primer on systems biology makes this clear:

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

¹¹ Some might argue that oppression doesn't occur until there is a self-reinforcing historical process (thanks to Ruth Chang for pointing this out). 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, for example, Frye's birdcage (1983), or Payton (2022). Although I won't explicitly discuss this aspect of oppression in this chapter, it fits well with the idea of injustice being embedded in a complex system. Is oppression necessarily self-reinforcing? I leave that question open.

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, p. 1662)

In other words, aspects of a system (physical or social) 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. In other words, we need more than a structure of relations to capture how social systems reproduce themselves and evolve. We also need to include the dynamics of the system in order to anticipate how and when relations between parts of a system remain stable, and when they don't. This is important in order to find the leverage points for social change.

Understanding societies as complex dynamic systems is important for the argument of this paper for three reasons.¹² First, complex systems are self-organizing and homeostatic, but also dynamic and evolving. 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 system can evolve (or 'learn') as conditions change.

Second, complex systems involve inter-level feedback loops, and so tend to display emergence. Unlike mechanistic systems, they are not best understood by localization and decomposition (Silberstein and Chimero, 2013; cf. Bechtel, 2011). If we assume methodological individualism, then the parts of a social system are individual persons; combining this with the idea that societies are simple (rather than complex) systems, there is a temptation to think that the solution to oppression lies in hearts and minds. In other words, we should focus on psychological interventions. I'm not denying that changing hearts and minds matters, but the workings of a complex system cannot be explained by decomposing it into its parts and tracing how they interact. In a complex system:

one component may affect and be affected by several others, with a cascading effect; or there may be significant feedback from "later" to "earlier" stages. In the latter case, what is functionally dependent becomes unclear. [Looping i]nteraction among components becomes critical... In such cases, attempting to understand the operation of the entire [system] by following the activities in each component in a brute force manner is liable to be futile.

(Bechtel and Richardson, 1993, p. 18)

¹² For more on the distinction between complex dynamic systems and simple systems, see Mitchell (2009) and Ladyman et al. (2013). On co-integration, see Murray (1994). Note that 'complexity' is a technical term in this discussion and does not simply mean complicated.

Third, in complex systems, the structure (and environment) of the system can impose constraints on the components in a way that shapes them 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). I’ve just argued that social systems interpellate subjects through social learning and their participation in practices. An important consequence of this is that although some forms of oppression occur by picking out a target group for unjust treatment, another form occurs in the formation of the social group. (We will return to this.)

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, the cracks are where the light gets in (Cohen, 1992).

3. Social Groups

Recall that it is crucial to the idea of oppression that it concerns injustice or harm to groups: racial oppression concerns the oppression of non-White people; gender oppression concerns the oppression of non-cis-men, etc. This is sometimes expressed by the claim that oppression is “group-based.” Applying this to the intersectionality, the question becomes: how do group-based oppressions interact or “converge.”

There are many different kinds of social groups and different accounts of what social groups are. Young, for example, resists the idea that social groups are mere ‘aggregates’ of individuals (‘a classification of persons according to some attribute’). She suggests, instead, that:

[a] social group is a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or way of life. Members of a group have a specific affinity with one another because of their similar experience or way of life, which prompts them to associate with one another more than with those not identified with the group, or in a different way. (Young, 1990, p. 43)

She continues:

Though sometimes objective attributes are a necessary condition for classifying oneself or others as belonging to a certain social group, *it is identification with a*

certain social status, the common history that social status produces, and self-identification that define the group as a group. (ibid., p. 44, my italics)¹³

However, this isn't adequate as a general account of group for understanding 'group-based' oppression. Class oppression is surely a central case to be captured by any account, but class consciousness is something to be achieved, and cannot be assumed. Young also suggests that the sexual division of labor 'in all known societies' (ibid., p. 43) creates the groups *women* and *men*, but leaves it unclear how the sexual division of labor is related to sex/gender identity. The sexual division of labor varies across history and culture, and it isn't clear that sex/gender identity always maps onto the *classes* formed by the division of labor.¹⁴ So what is the relevant sense of 'group' for understanding 'group-based oppression'?

There are two broad ways of understanding how groups are relevant to oppression, one in terms of discrimination, the other in terms of social formation. Both kinds of oppression surely occur, but it is important to be clear about their differences.

On the discrimination model of group-based oppression, there is a group, say, Asians, who are wrongfully treated *by virtue of the fact that they are Asian*. In other words, individuals are targets of wrongful treatment because of their racial group membership. More generally, on this account, group injustice occurs when discrimination targets members of a group (sometimes members of their own group, when derogatory attitudes are internalized) and deprives them of due respect, status, and other social goods and benefits; the relevant target groups are defined by features of individuals that the individuals may not, themselves, identify with, e.g. being poor, being a woman, being elderly, being fat. One form of the discrimination model locates the source of the wrongful treatment in the psychology of the oppressor, e.g. in derogatory attitudes or ill-will toward a group (see, e.g. Garcia, 1996; Blum, 2002). However, some versions of this model allows that the work of oppression may happen structurally through law, policy, or social norms. But institutions or structures are oppressive insofar as the laws or policies discriminate either directly or indirectly *on the basis of* group membership.

Although such discrimination surely occurs, accounts of oppression aim to capture a wider set of phenomena. On the social formation model of oppression, the group in question is *produced* through the oppressive structure, i.e., the individuals constitute a group because they are similarly positioned in the structure. Class is the paradigmatic example. Illustrating the point simply, societies involve

¹³ Young also claims, however, that 'A group may be identified by outsiders without those so identified having any specific consciousness of themselves as a group' (1990, p. 46), so it is somewhat unclear whether or not identity and shared way of life are necessary, on her view.

¹⁴ I have previously suggested that gender is constituted through something like the sexual division of labor, but have been appropriately corrected that gender identity is not best understood in these terms. I'm asking a question here about Young's account, not how or whether identity is relevant.

a division of labor. Under capitalism, some individuals own the means of production and others provide labor. Those who sell their labor don't necessarily have some "natural" feature in common. Rather, their circumstances make it necessary for them to work for a wage. Under capitalism, those who work for a wage are similarly positioned in the structure—they are exploited—and constitute the working class. We need not assume that capitalists have hostile or derogatory attitudes toward 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.¹⁵ It would be odd to say that capitalism discriminates "based on class," as if there is a working class (independent of capitalism) and capitalism discriminates against them. Capitalism is an oppressive system that produces wage workers and capitalists. Oppression occurs in both ways. Importantly, however, not all structural group formation is oppressive. A group may consist of individuals who occupy a particular node in a set of relations, without the group being privileged or oppressed, if the relations are just.

There are two axes of difference in considering the discrimination model and the social formation models of oppression. One axis is the conception of a group: Is there a group, defined by a property that is, in the context in question, derogated? Or is the group defined by its place in an oppressive social structure? Another axis is the normative basis for attributing wrongful treatment: Is the group wrongfully treated based on a morally irrelevant property? Or are the social relations that constitute the group intrinsically harmful or unjust? The latter case captures the structural account of oppression. Consider, for example, was the wrong of chattel slavery simply a matter of racial discrimination? Surely not. The structure of chattel slavery and its creation of the master/slave relation were wrong. It produced a class of people—slaves, their descendants, and those who are presumed to be descendants—who have suffered miserably. The class of slaves was racialized as Black and surely suffered discrimination, but the moral wrong is not only that there has been racial discrimination in populating the class. A further problem lies in the structure that constituted Black slaves (and their descendants) as a group. Discrimination theory does not provide the tools to unpack broad structural formations and how they are oppressive.

Note that the social formation model allows that there are biological, psychological, or cultural features that are relevant to the process of social group formation, e.g. patriarchal systems use sex markers to create genders. But the social group, as such, is defined by its social position in the structure. As suggested above, it is also compatible with the social formation model that members of the group are also discriminated against, e.g. wage workers and their children are

¹⁵ 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.

denied certain educational opportunities because they can't afford them or because they are considered "stupid" (Kadi, 1999).

Surely, just as there are different forms of oppression, and different group wrongs, there will be different phenomena to consider. I will be focusing on cases of structural oppression, and especially group-constituting structural oppression.¹⁶ I believe Dembroff's Chapter 21 is also primarily concerned with such cases. Networks of social relations don't usually position all and only women, or all and only people of color at nodes. Instead, the vulnerabilities and advantages are multi-dimensional and context sensitive, for example, Filipina nannies, Black trans sex-workers, White male billionaires (or mass shooters), are created by and sustain the system.

4. Intersectional Practices

Sometimes discussion of intersectionality presumes the existence of social groups exogenous to the system of oppression. For example, it is imagined that 'Asians' are individuals who come from Asia, and systems of racist oppression have harmful and wrongful effects on the group, as such. But even Asians don't constitute a *social group* prior to the vulnerability experienced under colonialism. Those living in, or descended from those recently living in, Asia are members of the social/racial group Asian by virtue of the history of our global political economy. 'Asian,' 'Latinx,' and 'Black,' now exist as pan-ethnic categories one can identify with, but the categories have been created through a long and tortuous process of racialization (Espiritu, 1992). And this process has simultaneously created specific economic and gender relations.

In this section, I will briefly consider a case study involving domestic workers of color in the twentieth-century United States.¹⁷ As Dembroff suggests, the intersectionality in these cases is not best explained by two (or three) systems *interacting*. In Section 5, I will then consider whether we do better by deploying Dembroff's account of intersectionality as *overlapping* systems and will raise some doubts. I will then sketch a different view of how intersectionality works in such cases.

In her article, 'From Servitude to Service Work,' Evelyn Nakano Glenn argues for the interdependence of race and gender in the structure of social reproduction

¹⁶ Crenshaw (1997) helpfully distinguishes structural, political, and representational intersectionality, but there are additional kinds.

¹⁷ Originally I had intended to use two examples, the Glenn (1992) example discussed, and the example of the foster care to prison pipeline discussed in Roberts (2022). The Roberts example is more current and provides a better case of the workings of a complex system. But limitations of space make it difficult to spell it out. I strongly recommend that readers interested in intersectional oppressive systems read Roberts' work.

in the early to mid-twentieth-century United States (Glenn, 1992). I cannot do justice to Glenn's richly textured historical argument, but I hope to capture some of her insights to develop an argument about how the social system in question constituted racialized, economically positioned, women, not just women, as such. Given that the system remains in place (though changed in many ways), it should also help us understand the broader phenomenon of intersectionality.¹⁸

The idea of social reproduction originated in Marx and Engels' idea that systems of production depend on systems of *reproduction*, namely, those systems that manage the reproduction of social subjects. Such systems must manage not only sexual reproduction but also the social and cultural work required for humans to become part of society. Social reproduction is done as unwaged work in the family (historically, also by slaves), and is also done in waged service work and education. It includes:

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. (ibid., p. 1)

Glenn argues that White women and women of other race-ethnicities occupied very different social positions in the system of social reproduction in the twentieth century.¹⁹ I've suggested above that to understand particular systems, we should start with the network of practices that constitute them. Glenn shows that in the early to mid-twentieth century, 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 (non-poor) White women in order to do all but birth the babies and, in particular, to do their 'dirty work.' Glenn's discussion considers White women, ranging from working class to affluent, and poor women of color. (She notes, 'white skin privilege transcended class lines'

¹⁸ There is a controversy in socialist feminism whether our goal should be to understand the 'logic of capitalism' to determine whether it essentially involves the exploitation of gendered and racialized subjects, or whether capitalism's relationship to gender and race is more contingent and opportunistic. I agree with Arruzza (2015b) that we do not need to answer this question in order to make progress in understanding the system we are currently embedded in.

¹⁹ 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' (Glenn, 1992, p. 2, n. 4). I agree with her thought that the relevant sub-groups of women not only are racial groups but also include ethnic groups. Although Glenn focuses on women racialized as Black, Latina, and Asian, attention should also be paid to the backdrop of settler colonialism and the racialization of Native peoples in the Americas. However, because I would include White women in the context as also having a race and ethnicity (a dominant race-ethnicity), I've switched from her term 'racial-ethnic women' to 'women of color.'

(*ibid.*, p. 10) for even working-class families hired Black domestics for housework.) She doesn't attempt to capture the social position of women *as a group*, the poor *as a group*, or Whites, Blacks, Latinx, or Asian *as groups*. It is a situated analysis of a particular social formation that constituted social subjects through domestic labor.

Glenn points out the tight connection between class and race, arguing that in some contexts 'being served by members of the subordinate [racial-ethnic] group was a prerequisite of membership in the dominant group' (*ibid.*, p. 9). Moreover, those applying for jobs distinguished between different racial-ethnically coded categories: 'domestics themselves were attuned to the racial-ethnic hierarchy among them. When advertising for jobs, women who did not identify themselves as Black overwhelmingly requested "housekeeping" or "governess" positions, whereas Blacks advertised for "cooking," "laundering," or just plain "domestic work"' (*ibid.*, p. 10, n19). Although early in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, domestic labor in California and Hawaii was often done by Asian men (due to the 'unfavorable sex ratio' (*ibid.*, p. 9)); once more Asian women immigrated they 'inherited the mantle of service' (*ibid.*, p. 9).

The employment of poor women of color as domestics meant that they had little time to devote to their own children. In contrast to the glorification of non-poor White women's motherhood, the domestics' own mothering abilities (and their time) was appropriated for the care of others, rather than their own children. The gendering of their labor situated them in the domestic sphere primarily as workers for White women, and secondarily as mothers or wives in their own families. Later in the century, domestic work became more institutionalized by corporations, non-profits (such as hospitals and other medical facilities), and the state. But it remained true that the most labor intensive, most unpleasant, and least well-paid jobs in reproductive labor go to people of color, and many are mostly occupied by women of color.

The structure of these practices was affected by many different factors, including norms and ideals of White womanhood (concerning 'feminine virtue' (*ibid.*, p. 8)), restrictions on legal and political rights of women of color (*ibid.*, p. 8), economic coercion (*ibid.*, pp. 12–13), educational systems focused on domestic training for women of color (*ibid.*, pp. 11–12), and various forms of racial-ethnic bias. These forces combined to create a self-perpetuating system of social reproduction that produces the group, *poor women of color* as well as the group *non-poor White women*. These two groups are relationally constituted through these practices (*ibid.*, p. 34): the relational structure situates non-poor White women and women of color different nodes (and in different clusters of nodes). The system depends on distinguishing them and, importantly, the groups have conflicting interests (*ibid.*, p. 37). A complete analysis would include a fuller discussion of how poor Whites and men are situated in relation to the cases discussed, but we can make progress with just this partial analysis.

5. Interaction or Overlap?

How should we understand intersectionality in this example? Dembroff considers two ways of understanding intersectionality: interaction or overlap. On both of the approaches they discuss, White Supremacy is one system, patriarchy is another, and capitalism is a third, though they focus on patriarchy and White Supremacy (so I'll also focus on those here). Dembroff rejects interaction in favor of overlap. How might we understand intersection as interaction?

5.1 Interaction

Dembroff reads me as an interactionist about intersectionality: They argue,

Because systems like patriarchy do not have their own unique set of outcomes, Haslanger (2020b) concludes that these distinct systems do not exist:

Patriarchy is not the system that oppresses us...Patriarchy doesn't exist (as a system unto itself). The system that oppresses us is a patriarchal system...but 'patriarchy' is not an adequate label for that system, any more than, say, 'heteronormativity' or 'ableism' is. If we want a name for the tendency of the social order to target women, we could use the adjective, e.g. we live in a *capitalist white supremacist nationalist ableist ageist heteronormative... etc. patriarchal order*.

In other words, because patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, and so on are happening at the same time and in the same places, Haslanger argues that our names for these systems are simply different guises for what is in fact a single system... (Chapter 21, pp. 384–5)

Admittedly, my discussion of a single system account was brief and inadequate in the text Dembroff quotes, but I don't see where I say in the text that because we cannot separate the effects of patriarchy, White supremacy, or capitalism in the outputs, there must be one system. That was not and is not my argument. Even in my earlier piece, I argue that the systems that "interact" are functional/material systems, rather than patriarchy (though I find the term 'interaction' misleading, given that, on my view structural co-integration is the relevant notion):

Patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity, ableism and the like, are not separate subsystems of society like the system of food production, or healthcare, that manage a particular good or domain. So treating patriarchy as an intersecting system of this sort, even with the addition of other systems, is not promising.
(Haslanger, 2020a, p. 223)

I go on to argue, that not only is treating patriarchy (or capitalism) as one of the interacting sub-systems unpromising, but it is misguided; however, importantly, I argue that we can see patriarchal outcomes that result from the co-integration of the material/functional systems. I'll return to Dembroff's critique of interaction below, but first, let's consider their favored account.

5.2 Overlap

As I understand Dembroff, intersectionality is not the result of *interacting* systems; instead, it is the result of *overlapping* systems. Dembroff focuses on the intersection of gender and race, or rather, the systems of patriarchy and White supremacy, so I will too. On their view, patriarchy and White supremacy stand to each other as statue to clay, as duck to rabbit, or as waking pour over to calming pour over. Given that none of these analogies involve systems, we need to do some work to find the parallels.

What are the systems at issue? Dembroff says:

Patriarchy is a system in which people are regulated (by themselves, other people, and institutions) in accordance with gender ideology—schemas of meaning and value that tell us how to classify and evaluate people as men or women. White supremacy is a system in which people are regulated (by themselves, other people, and institutions) in accordance with racial ideology—schemas of meaning and value that tell us how to classify and evaluate people (e.g.) as White, as Black, as Asian, etc. (Chapter 21, p. 387)

As we saw above, on their view, unjust systems are individuated by their ideologies and “Th[e] process of reproducing ideology, in my view, is what we mean when we talk about a ‘system of injustice.’ A system of injustice *just is* the process of continuously reproducing a particular ideology” (ibid., p. 385).

My first worry is that there is no particular sub-system in our current social formation whose job it is to reproduce gender ideology because gender ideology is reproduced everywhere in every sub-system. Gender ideologies are reproduced in health care, in education, in transportation, in politics, in families, and the same is true of race ideologies. This point tracks the critique of traditional dual systems models discussed among socialist feminists (Young, 1980/1990). Some socialist feminists maintained that society involved two systems: the system of economic production and the system of social reproduction; the system of production is capitalism and the system of social reproduction is patriarchy. But as unitary theorists argued, the systems of production and social reproduction are co-integrated and there are capitalist and patriarchal dynamics in both.

This concern, however, presupposes that we are discussing functional/material sub-systems, rather than ideologically individuated systems, and the latter is

Dembroff's preferred understanding of systems. But what is the system, then, that is individuated by gender ideology, as distinct from race ideology (and other ideologies)? If, as I just suggested, all systems are imbued with gender and race ideology, then one might argue that the system that reproduces gender is the whole social formation and the system that reproduces race is the whole social formation. So perhaps we should interpret Dembroff as talking not about sub-systems of our current social formation, but about how whole social formations are individuated across time and place. So, for example, the social formation of the twenty-first-century United States can be distinguished from a social formation at a different time based on its different racial ideology, or its different gender ideology. For example, we can distinguish the twenty-first-century United States from twentieth-century Onitsha (Igbo) society (Nzegwu, 2005) or pre-colonial Latin America (Lugones, 2016) based on their gender ideologies, because the dominant gender ideologies of twenty-first-century United States is binary and cis-male-dominant-bio-hetero-normative, whereas the others are not (*mutatis mutandis* for racial and other ideologies).

This interpretation of the system of patriarchy and the system of White supremacy would fit better with the analogies of statue/clay and duck/rabbit. The system of patriarchy and the system of White supremacy would then co-exist in a single formation in the contemporary United States, but because they have different temporal/modal profiles, they would diverge at other times and be instantiated separately (or not at all). As Dembroff suggests: "In the contemporary United States, [gender and race] ideologies are constituted by the same spaces and practices. But they do different explanatory work, and they have different modal properties" (Chapter 21, p. 393). Just as the statue could exist but be made of different clay, and the clay could exist and not be formed into a statue, so patriarchy could exist without White supremacy and vice versa. Nevertheless, patriarchy and White supremacy are categorically the same here and now, even though distinct due to their modal properties.²⁰ (The point of the pour over examples, then, is to extend the cases from objects to processes.)

Presumably there are many different kinds of oppressive gender systems, and one might ask, which are patriarchal? Dembroff suggests that patriarchy is a system "in which people are regulated (by themselves, other people, and institutions) in accordance with gender ideology—schemas of meaning and value that tell us how to classify and evaluate people as men or women" (also quoted above). Let's suppose that patriarchal gender systems are ones that are oppressively binary and

²⁰ Note that the statue/clay example seems to assume a levels approach to ontology. The clay exists at one level and the statue at another, and the two levels do not causally interact (this is crucial to Dembroff's idea that *overlap is a substitute for interaction*). However, an ontology of encapsulated levels is not explanatorily useful in considering complex systems, for often things at different levels causally interact and create what are sometimes called "causal thickets" (Wimsatt, 1994). This is cross-level interaction is typical in biology, but it can even be seen in the statue/clay example. The statue and clay can have different causes and effects which loop back; a community might object to a confederate statue (the statue, not the clay, causes the objections) and so they flatten the clay.

(cis-)male dominant. If so, then because the Onitsha (Igbo) and certain pre-colonial Latin American societies are arguably non-binary, they would not be patriarchal. But non-binary gender systems might still be oppressive if they privilege men. And isn't it plausible that different kinds of patriarchal systems have different patriarchal ideologies? (Note also that not all White supremacist ideologies are alike (consider the differences between racial classifications in Brazil and in the United States), and they change over time.) But now I wonder how we should think of ideologies.

One thought is that an ideology is patriarchal (or White supremacist) just in case, when implemented in the various systems that make up the social formation, it produces or sustains binary male-dominant gender oppression (or White-dominant race oppression). In other words, to determine whether an ideology is patriarchal, we should ask, e.g. does the ideology at work in the context in question (in response to the material conditions and context of agency) produce hierarchically stratified genders with cis-hetero-men on top? Or, for White supremacy, does it produce hierarchically stratified races with Whites on top? On this approach ideologies cannot be identified as gender or race ideologies apart from their implementation, and more importantly, their overlapping implementation. But this leaves us with the question whether overlap is sufficient to make sense of intersectionality, for presumably the ideologies are part of a process of the formation of social agents that involves both racial and gender dynamics (note: dynamics are not parts or elements). Otherwise we would end up with a kind of "ampersand" approach to intersectionality, which is widely recognized as insufficient (hooks, 1981, 1984; Spelman, 1988).

Dembroff further argues, however, that we need to make reference to a system of patriarchy and a system of White supremacy to offer adequate explanations of gender and race oppression. For example:

an explanation of why mass incarceration specifically targets Black men most of all will have to go into more detail about how these two things—gender regulation, ideas of manhood, and the racial weaponization of the carceral system—coincide. These explanations, in some sense, are about the same thing: the demographic realities of mass incarceration. But because they respond to different inquiries that emphasize distinct counterfactual contrasts, the explanations offer importantly different causal narratives for these outcomes. (Chapter 21, pp. 393–4)

As I understand Dembroff's point, we are aiming to answer the question (among others):

3. Why does mass incarceration impact Black men more than any other gendered racial group? (ibid., p. 393).

On the account I've offered elsewhere (and Dembroff cites), we should analyze the question to make it more precise, in terms of focus and foils. A plausible analysis would yield that we should look for a difference maker between Black men and non-Black-men with respect to mass incarceration. Surely, there are different levels of explanation that might be relevant.

In my discussion (Haslanger, 2016), I was concerned to argue that we shouldn't necessarily look for individualistic answers in terms of the beliefs and desires of, say, the individuals alleged to commit the crimes, the police who arrest them, the judges and juries who convict and sentence them, but instead point to the structural conditions—and the various practices that are interconnected in that structure—that affect the possibility space for agents in the circumstances. Part of the task of providing an explanation is to find patterns in the detail. Looking for a difference maker between Black men and non-Black-men by cataloging the beliefs and desires of all of those relevant to the phenomenon is too much detail, because the patterns that make the difference appear in the material conditions and the cultural technē (including law, policing practices, etc.).

My goal was to argue for the value of a meso-level explanation that would be specific to our social formation. But another goal might be to seek an explanation that would be more general. Let's reconsider, then, how to interpret question (3). And, in particular, under what conditions do we need to know what is essential to patriarchy and/or White supremacy to answer it? Consider some options (of course there are many more):

- 3*. Why does mass incarceration impact Black men more than any other gendered racial group *in the United States in the past 50 years*?
- 3**. Why does mass incarceration impact Black men more than any other gendered racial group *in the world in the past 25 years*?
- 3***. Why does mass incarceration *necessarily* impact Black men more than any other gendered racial group *ever*?

Rather than considering why Black men are impacted most by mass incarceration in the last 25 years in the United States, the scope of the question might be much broader (as in (3**) and (3***)) and the specific practices and policies of our current social formation would then fail to be the difference maker.

Moving up levels of explanation (which is not the same as moving up levels of ontology) is motivated by the desire for a more general and more stable explanation. Very detailed explanations are good for a particular case (why was this Black man incarcerated?), but are more fragile (small changes in the antecedent conditions undermine them) and aren't generalizable. Explaining patterns structurally provides a more robust explanation. However, it seems to me that (3***) has a false presupposition, so isn't a good question. If the presupposition of (3***)

is not false, then questions (3*) and (3**) probably have different answers, and it isn't entirely clear to me how reference to the essential ideology of patriarchy and the essential ideology of White supremacy gives us answers. And if it does, then won't those ideologies have to not just overlap but combine or interact to give us a satisfying explanation? I honestly don't know how to adjudicate what level of explanation is called for (maybe any or all of the levels, depending on one's purposes?); and I can't yet see what specific question about mass incarceration calls for the very high level of answer that involves the essence of patriarchy or White supremacy.

5.3 Integration

On my account, an ideology is a cultural *technē*—a set of semiotic tools—that functions to distort or obscure aspects of the world that are morally relevant, with the result that those practices guided by the ideology (in a particular material context) sustain oppression. For example, it includes simple meanings such as “pink means girl” and also complex logics or clusters of approved inferences; it shapes our perception and frames the possibilities for action in terms that maintain the status quo.

This account of ideology does justice to the phenomena of intersectional *social formation*. I used the example of social reproduction in the early to mid-twentieth-century southern United States to illustrate this point. Think back to Glenn's study of domestics. The ideology in that context involved a semiotics that was imbued with race, class, and gender. To begin, labor is divided in the system, but women do not all perform the same kind of labor or share an identity. Ideology manages the distribution of the tasks of social reproduction including: ‘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, p. 1). We might also add, having sex with men, being pregnant, giving birth, and breastfeeding.

Obviously, the labor to accomplish these things is done by different groups. People who are capable of pregnancy and childbirth are expected to do that labor, but not all women are so-capable (and some trans men are, though that was less relevant in the context of the study); breastfeeding was sometimes done by wet-nurses; and both women and men sometimes have sex with men. However, those whose lives are frequently punctuated by pregnancy are easily marked as members of a group especially relevant to social reproduction: they do the labor of *sexual* reproduction. But even the labor of pregnancy and childbirth is racialized, for White women bear White babies, and Black women, Black babies. Motherhood is racialized, for while White motherhood is glorified, childcare and other

household tasks were outsourced to others who, consequently, were less able to care for their own children, and relied on other kin, for example, older children, aunts, grandmothers:

Employers accepted a cult of domesticity that purported to elevate the status of women as mothers and homemakers, yet they made demands on domestics that hampered them from carrying out these responsibilities in their own households...Racial characterizations effectively neutralized the racial-ethnic woman's womanhood, allowing the mistress to be "unaware" of the domestic's relationship to her own children and household. (ibid., p. 32)

But more important for our purposes here 'doing gender' (or race or class) is always a way of (or simultaneously) doing something else, e.g. doing parenting, doing one's job, doing walking down the street, because the social relations are part of co-integrated economic, political, cultural, military, and medical systems.²¹ Gender, race, and class occur in the co-integrated structures and co-integrated ideologies of these sub-systems: the choice architecture for White women is shaped in relation to the choice architecture of Black women and vice versa. An integrated system that is both patriarchal and White supremacist creates gender/race positions. We should add to this, of course, capitalism. In the process of creating gender/race, the system also produces class: 'the higher standard of living of one woman is made possible by, and also helps to perpetuate, the other's lower standard of living' (ibid., p. 34). Parallel cases could be made for ways the system constitutes other oppressed groups.

6. Conclusion

If intersectionality is not well captured by interaction or overlap, how should we understand it? What are the relevant systems? What are the relevant groups? I have suggested elsewhere (Haslanger, 2020a), as Dembroff notes, that patriarchy and White supremacy are not distinct social systems in our current social formation; that is, patriarchy and White supremacy are not its "sub-systems." I've claimed that, in short, the social formation has patriarchal and White supremacist dynamics and so produces a broad variety of gendered and racialized social positions and related forms of injustice. These dynamics are the result of the rather fluid, but also richly textured semiotics, and their interaction with the material and agential conditions. To claim that our social formation is one system is not to deny that there are interdependent sub-systems that should be differentiated, for

²¹ I take this to be one of the important insights in Witt (2011).

example, political systems, health care systems, transportation systems, tax systems; the point is that patriarchy and White supremacy, etc. are not such sub-systems.

I also agree with Dembroff that what it is for a system to be patriarchal or White Supremacist—what the essences of these forms of oppression are—outstrips our current social formation and involves modal considerations. After all, social systems were patriarchal before they were capitalist or White supremacist. But it is not entirely clear to me that to produce explanations of intersectional phenomena, it is necessary or adequate to rely on overlapping, non-interacting, systems. The questions I am most interested in are usually best answered by considering functional/material systems in which gender and race ideologies are contingently implemented, rather than making reference to systems that are essentially patriarchal or White supremacist. More generally, the question I took myself to be asking when considering whether patriarchy and White supremacy are distinct systems in our social formation is whether *our particular social formation at this historical moment*, should be understood as a single system with patriarchy, White Supremacy, and capitalism as *sub-systems* (Arruzza, 2015a; 2015b).

I argued in Section 1 that feminists (and other critical theorists) face a challenge. How should we understand the idea that oppression is ‘group based’? If we say *women* are an oppressed group, then it looks like we have two options. On the first option, we must find a form of shared sex/gender oppression for all and only women suffer *as women*; on the second option, we should accept that there isn’t a form of oppression that women suffer *as women*. The first option, I suggested, sets up the problem of intersectionality because it looks like women are oppressed in very different ways, depending on how they are situated in multiple groups, and there isn’t a single set of sex/gender features that make them vulnerable to such oppression. The supposition that there is a way all and only women are oppressed seems to homogenize an importantly diverse phenomenon. The second option raises the issue of whether women *as a group* are oppressed. How can we deny this? Isn’t this a core feminist insight?

I recommend a version of the second option: there isn’t a form of oppression that women suffer, *as women*. This means that there isn’t a single form of sex/gender oppression, and that the ‘basis’ for the oppression women suffer is not (at least not always) *being a woman*. The idea that oppression is ‘group-based’ is unclear, at best, and obscures the many different ways that groups are constituted. Moreover, the contemporary patriarchal, White supremacist, capitalist, etc. system, does not just *respond* to group membership, but plays a role in *constituting* gendered/raced/class-positioned groups. The dynamics of patriarchy, White supremacy, and capitalism produce groups in material systems, and when these

groups form patterns of disadvantage and privilege, the different patterns can be characterized as racial, gendered, classed.²²

The question remains, however: If we take the option that women are not oppressed *as women*, can we still make the claim that women are oppressed? What does that even mean? What makes it the case that the form of oppression in question—a form that produces Black laundresses, Japanese maids, and White club leaders—is a form of sex/gender oppression? I don't have a full answer to this question, but like Dembroff, I'm drawn to the answer that broad identity categories are best thought of as coalitions (Chapter 21, p. 394, n. 16, also Crenshaw (1991) and Carastathis (2013)). There is one integrated system that differentiates social relations in complex and overlapping ways along lines of what we recognize as gender, race, class, etc.

I admit that these questions of system individuation may seem pointless or semantic. Part of the problem is that there are many ways to think about 'systems' and disagreements over whether patriarchy is a system are sometimes purely verbal. Moreover, it isn't always clear what is at stake. What difference does it make if we view patriarchy as its own system or not? I grant that for many purposes we don't need to answer this question.

However, as I suggested above, there are many reasons it is important to see societies as complex dynamic systems—systems that reproduce themselves without a central authority, systems that are not decomposable into lower-level parts that interact mechanistically, systems in which seemingly independent behavior is actually co-integrated interdependent. This latter point is especially important in my critique of Dembroff, for they explicitly claim that the causal structures of racialization and gendering cannot interact because they are the same structure (think of the pour over) (Chapter 21, p. 392). However, as I believe the case study from Glenn shows, White women and Black women are often constituted correlatively in a dynamic process where changes in one structural position are adjusted for in the other. More generally the structure of our system is co-constituting groups (sex/gender, race, ethnicity, class, ability, sexuality, nationality, and more) through particular, material, integrated practices. And as a consequence, we must be vigilant in attending to the rippling effect of any proposed change. As Glenn suggests, attention to intersectionality 'alerts us to sources of inertia and resistance to change. The discussion of how the racial division of labor reinforced the

²² This approach is consistent with a pluralism about sex/gender. As Young claims, '[o]ppression has often been perpetrated by a conceptualization of group difference in terms of unalterable essential natures that determine what group members deserve or are capable of...' (Young, 1999, p. 47). She suggests, instead, that 'group differentiation [is] multiple, cross-cutting, fluid, and shifting' (ibid., p. 48). Groups, as I understand them, can have a variety of gateways; not only are different groups differently positioned in relation to oppression, but individuals can enter a group in different ways.

gender division of labor makes clear that tackling gender hierarchy requires simultaneously addressing race hierarchy' (Glenn, 1992, p. 36).

In short, there are political consequences of a single-system approach. If race and gender are co-integrated, then efforts to change the patriarchal aspects of the system—even efforts just to change gender ideology—will have direct effects on the White Supremacist aspects, for better or worse.²³ Glenn continues:

forging a political agenda that addresses the universal needs of women is highly problematic not just because women's priorities differ but because gains for some groups may require a corresponding loss of advantage and privilege for others. As the history of the racial division of reproductive labor reveals, conflict and contestation among women over definitions of womanhood, over work, and over the conditions of family life are part of our legacy as well as the current reality. This does not mean we give up the goal of concerted struggle. It means we give up trying falsely to harmonize women's interests. (ibid., p. 37)

In the end, I think my view of intersectionality is very close to Dembroff's in its aims and consequences, and even much of its details; our political commitments are also, as far as I can tell, aligned. Our ontologies are quite different, however. How much do these ontological and explanatory differences matter? I'm not sure.

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²³ Dembroff's view may suggest that we could end patriarchy before we end White supremacy (Chapter 21, p. 392). Of course, in principle, a single system could cease being patriarchal while still being White supremacist, so that by itself is no reason to adopt a dual system view.

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