

## **Explanations of Systemic Disadvantage: Discrimination and Social Formation**

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### Abstract

One of the challenges in discussing structural injustice is that it is not entirely clear how to understand what social structures are and how agents are situated in them. This is important, for in order to address such injustice, we should find the leverage points that we can use to make our society more just. Thus, we should ask: How and why do oppressive systems reproduce themselves? In particular, why are they so durable even in the face of significant and ongoing efforts to change them? This paper sketches two kinds of answers to this question: the discrimination model and the social formation model. The discrimination model is relatively familiar, so my first aim is to sketch the alternative social formation model. I argue, then, that the discrimination model is incomplete and cannot fully capture the systemic nature of oppression. This does not mean that the social formation model stands on its own. The two models typically work together and reinforce each other. By developing an ontology that includes social systems and their material and semiotic dynamics, we are in a better position both to see why oppression is so durable and to find additional measures to address its many harms.

### **1. Introduction**

In the past decade there has been increasing attention to structural injustice and structural harm, though the issues have long been part of the discussion of group-based wrong, e.g., Marx (1867/1971); Mill (1869/1997); du Bois 1899/2017; de Beauvoir 1997/1949; Ture & Hamilton 1967; Young 1990; Ezorsky 1991).<sup>1</sup> One of the challenges in discussing structural injustice is that it is not entirely clear how to understand what social structures are and how agents are situated in them. On the one hand, methodological individualists are apt to question the reality of social structures, assuming that social facts are reducible to and explainable in terms of facts about individuals.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, some structuralists have talked about structures in ways suggesting that individuals lack real agency, and structures determine what we do.<sup>3</sup> Neither of these options are plausible. Are there other options?

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<sup>1</sup> The issues arising in connection with structural injustice have alternatively been characterized as “institutional injustice,” “systemic injustice,” “oppression,” “subjugation,” etc.

<sup>2</sup> Methodological individualism (MI) can be divided into two claims (Epstein 2009, 2014, 2015):

*Ontological individualism* (OI): the social world is exhaustively *constituted* by individuals (persons) and their relations and interactions. The slogan is: there is nothing in the social world over and above individuals and their interactions.

*Explanatory individualism* (EI): is the view that social phenomena should be *explained* in terms of individuals and their interactions.

<sup>3</sup> It is controversial whether any structuralists were ever committed to this claim, but Althusser (1971) and Bourdieu (1990) are often mentioned. (I myself don’t interpret them as social determinists.) For a discussion of some accounts that seem to be committed to this, see Porpora (1989).

The structure/agency problematic was central in social theory during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ortner 1982), but has drifted into the background in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, thanks, in part, to William Sewell’s classic paper “A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation” (1992). As Sewell made clear, structures do not determine how individuals act but, in effect, set up choice architectures that constrain and enable different kinds of action.<sup>4</sup> However, methodological individualism is still latent in discussions of social structures because there remains a broad assumption that because social world is, in some sense, “mind-dependent,” it must ultimately consist of or be grounded in the minds or intentions of individuals. Should we aim to construct an account of structures that conforms to the assumptions of methodological individualism? I don’t think so (Haslanger 2020a). It is time to put methodological individualism to rest.

In my view, in order to understand what social structures are, and how they can be unjust, we need an understanding of society. Social theory aims to provide this. Social theory is an interdisciplinary project that considers broad questions about how societies emerge, change, interact, and collapse, at different levels of analysis. To do this, it considers the role of agents, laws, culture, structures, geography, climate, and the like. Social systems have an internal structure and this, together with their environment, contribute to their changes, flourishing, or collapse.

Among the many questions social theory aims to address, these two are especially pressing for anyone who cares about social justice:

- a) How and why do oppressive systems reproduce themselves? In particular, why are they so durable even in the face of significant and ongoing efforts to change them?<sup>5</sup>
- b) How can the process of societal reproduction be effectively transformed so that, hopefully, better systems can emerge?<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Structures typically set up the choice options and payoffs (Satz & Ferejohn 1994), but in addition, subjects’ preferences are shaped by their participation in practices that form the structures and structures also have substantial effects on the payoffs. (See also Balkin 1998, 18). How practices form structures will become clearer below.

<sup>5</sup> There isn’t a consensus on what counts as oppression or how oppression is different, if it is, from injustice. Oppression is typically considered a form of “group-based” harm or wrongful treatment, or vulnerability to it. An individual can suffer wrong or harm *as an individual*, but insofar as they are oppressed, this occurs by virtue of being a member of one or more groups, e.g., it might be because they are Latina, or disabled, or queer, or all of the above. Classic texts on oppression include Frye (1983) and Young (1990). Kim (2024, Ch. 3) points out that on some accounts of oppression, such as Frye’s, the primary normative concern is autonomy, while on other accounts, such as Young’s there is normative attention to welfare. (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” (1990, 40).) It is plausible that the different forms of oppression (Young lists five) don’t share a normative core, but are unified by other features, e.g., that they are “group-based” or that they tend to cluster and produce feedback loops or “system caging” (Payton 2023, Liberto 2014).

<sup>6</sup> 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 obscures the gendered division of labor. I will follow the socialist feminist usage in distinguishing *societal reproduction* from the more specific *social reproduction*. Social reproduction includes sexual reproduction together with the broad range of the social and cultural work required for humans to become social agents. This is done as unwaged work in the family (also unwaged work by slaves) and in waged service work and education. Notably, these tasks of social reproduction are usually assigned to women.

These questions presuppose that at least in some cases, oppression is not due to a central authority imposing itself on the population. Consider gender oppression. There is no one “in charge” of gender. There are efforts to regulate gender, to disrupt gender, to punish those who don’t conform to certain conceptions of gender (Manne 2017). But gender is lived and navigated beyond the reach of the state. The same is true of race and ethnicity, sexuality, disability, appearance, and more. Civil rights and other legal protections are crucial, but they alone are not enough to achieve emancipation. But why not? Why are systems that gender us, racialize us, impoverish us, so sticky, and so resistant to transformative change?

Note that although the questions mention oppression and suggest that we should be engaged in the pursuit of social justice, they are not (straightforwardly) asking for a normative answer, e.g., what is justice? Or what does justice require?<sup>7</sup> The issues are ontological: How do societies – whether oppressive or not – maintain and reproduce themselves? What is a social *structure*? What is a social *system*? What gives a society its structure? What is the relationship between agents and structures? How can agents change structures and, importantly, is it possible to do so in a way that is transformative, short of war or other forms of violent disruption? (See also Haslanger 2023a, 2023b). My focus in this paper will be on question (a) about the stability and durability of oppressive systems, but I will be aiming for an account that gives us resources to address question (b) about how we might bring about social transformation in pursuit of justice and well-being. I am not going to address the question of what constitutes a just structure or how we know whether or not a structure is just.

In what follows, I begin by sketching a model of the social domain – I’ll call this an *associationist approach* (here simplified and idealized) – that sees the social world as constituted by individuals through their collective intentionality; and I will show how social structures might be captured within this model.<sup>8</sup> I’ll then argue that although the approach allows us to capture some social structures and their normatively problematic consequences, it is too limited. I’ll then offer a different picture of how societies work, relying on the idea that societies are complex dynamic systems. In particular, I’ll show how agency, culture, and material conditions are systematically interdependent and the dynamics at play in each domain are relevant to how a system evolves. More specifically, a different account of social systems provides better resources than the associationist model for understanding social structures and their dynamics, more specifically, how societies stabilize, transform, and evolve. My broad aim is to provide evidence that although an associationist social ontology is part of the story of structural injustice, it leaves us without all

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<sup>7</sup> Of course there are questions about what constitutes the normative wrong or harm of oppression, but it is also unclear what makes treatment “group-based.” This is a question of social ontology arising within social theory. What sorts of groups are relevant and how are they constituted?

<sup>8</sup> The claim that collective intentionality is the ground of sociality is fairly common in the literature on social ontology. Kirk Ludwig makes the point clearly: “Collective intentional behavior is implicated in every social practice or interaction, in every institution, from the simplest to the most complex...All other forms of social interaction, all social and institutional life, are built upon this foundation...A foundational understanding of social reality therefore depends upon understanding the nature of collective intentional behavior and how it differs from individual intentional behavior. And as any form of life that is recognizably human takes place in a social setting, understanding any distinctively human form of life at a fundamental level requires understanding the nature of collective intentional behavior” (Ludwig 2016, 3). See also Searle (1995, 2010) and Gilbert (1989, 2006). This broad claim is compatible with the considerable controversy about what counts as “collective intentional behavior” and what else beyond this is needed for an account of society.

the resources we need to analyze what’s going wrong in structurally unjust societies and how to change them.

## II. An Associationist Model of Society

### A. *Society as an Association*<sup>9</sup>

Let me start by considering an associationist model of the social domain that sees it as constituted by individuals through their collective intentionality. The associationist line of thought begins with groups of individuals, such as committees or friends engaged in an activity together. Such associations aren’t merely a set of individuals but are made up of individuals who (in some sense) share intentions. (Gilbert 1989; Bratman 1992, Searle 2010, Tuomela 2013, et al.)<sup>10</sup> There are many different accounts of collective intentionality. In describing associationism, I’m especially interested specifically in accounts according to which *sociality emerges when agents mutually shape their intentions* – and their intentional agency – in light of their interpretation of the intentions of others.

For the associationist, to understand the social world, the key question is how and under what conditions we act *together*. I don’t need collective intentionality to take a walk, nor is it even necessary for *us* to take a walk. However, collective intentionality plays a role in our doing the walk *together*.

Suppose you intend to visit the Taj Mahal tomorrow, and I intend to visit the Taj Mahal tomorrow. This does not make it the case that we intend to visit the Taj Mahal together. If I know about your plan, I may express (or refer to) our intention in the form “we intend to visit the Taj Mahal tomorrow”. But this does not imply anything collective about our intentions. Even if knowledge about our plan is common, mutual, or open between us, my intention and your intention may still be purely individual. For us to intend to visit the Taj Mahal together is something different. (Schweikard & Schmid 2021, §1)

On the kind of view in question, sociality involves a form of joint agency that is both *agency* in a full sense of the word, and *joint* in that it involves a kind of mutuality. Two people *intending* to paint the kitchen is insufficient for collective intentionality; two people *believing* that it should be painted yellow does not make

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<sup>9</sup> I set out this approach in a similar way in Haslanger (2025), though I have taken more care in distinguishing accounts of sociality that rest on collective intentionality and those that allow that sociality can just be a matter of joint or collective behavior that isn’t intentional. There is a large literature on collective intentionality and many different accounts of what it involves. (See, e.g., Jankovic & Ludwig 2018; Schweikard & Schmid 2021.)

<sup>10</sup> Typically the collective intentionality approach requires common knowledge between parties who have joint or collective belief, knowledge, or intention. Similarly, the standard views of convention rely on common knowledge. It is also often thought that collective intentionality requires language, e.g., Searle (2010) holds that “all institutional facts are linguistically created and linguistically constituted and maintained. So it can be misleading to describe some of them as “nonlinguistic” (93) and an institution, on his view, is simply “a system of constitutive rules” (10). However, what’s required for belief, intention, or common knowledge, (and institutions!) varies tremendously amongst authors, e.g., Lederman 2018; Schweikard & Schmid 2021. For example, Stalnaker’s approach to psychological attitudes, and so common knowledge, does not obviously require sophisticated metacognition, i.e., the representation of another’s mental state. See Stalnaker (2002; 2009). Ludwig argues that there are forms of common behavior that do not require common knowledge or mutual belief and that not all parties to a collective practice or activity need have common knowledge (Ludwig 2016, 169, 194-96, 221). As a result, there are plausibly some accounts of the collective intentionality approach that are not subject to some of the critiques I offer below, e.g., in §2.

common (or mutual) belief; two people *buying paint* is not collective action. Even if the two agents know about each other's plans, such cases may just involve parallel attitudes or actions. Collective intentionality is the "special sauce" that we add to two or more individuals doing, believing, or wanting, that makes it the case that they do or believe *together*.

According to the kind of associationist I have in mind, we are social when and because we do things *together*, and we do things *together* when our intentions are mutually responsive – we are actively involved in adjusting our intentions (and behavior) in light of our interpretation of the other. There are, of course, different important and subtle accounts of collective intentionality. I will not attend to their differences here for my point is more general: there are forms of sociality that do not require collective intentionality, and we need to take these forms into account in order to understand oppression and its durability.

Associationists, of the sort I have in mind, extend the idea that our small-scale sociality is associationist and view *societies* as modeled on associations.<sup>11</sup> Let's start with an example of a simple association so the parallels with societies are evident. You and I come to a joint intention to take a walk and so we adjust our actions in light of the desires and behavior of the other. We make such adjustments because we want to take a walk together and want it to be good for both of us. So we each have reasons to adjust our desires and actions in light of the other's and the conditions. If things start to go wrong – perhaps the path we had chosen is flooded – then we together decide on a new path. We might also come to an understanding of what to do if we run into another friend who wants to join us in our walk. We might jointly agree, for example, that when we take our usual walk on Sundays, it will just be the two of us; but if we take a walk on other days we can include other friends. This provides additional structure to the walk. We aren't just a pair of individuals taking a walk together, but a pair whose walks are structured by a convention.<sup>12</sup> So collective intentionality can arise spontaneously, as in a pair of us deciding to take a walk, or it can structure an association by virtue of background conventions. For example, the Supreme Court is a group whose members are not essential to it; it is allowed to change its members over time because we collectively agree on its role and structure.

Consider one way to extend this model to (an idealized) society. We have a joint intention to live together in a way that is good for all of us; accordingly, we collectively adjust our desires and actions in light of the (legitimate) desires of others and the conditions. It is difficult for us to do this with a large number of people, so we elect or appoint representatives to sort out what is the best way to carry on for the good of all, especially when it is difficult to satisfy everyone's preferences. The representatives take into account our joint goal of living well together and make a plan to solve our collective action problems; they convey this to us through law, policy, and such. The plan not only provides rules for what we need to do, but reasons that we should comply, given our joint intention(s) to live together well. It engages us as rational agents seeking to coordinate our activities. (We can also include a reificationist dimension of

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<sup>11</sup> The associationist view of society I sketch here is not often directly articulated and defended, so it is more a reconstruction of what I take to be a fairly common background picture. As such, it is vulnerable to the objection that even if there are a few people who may adopt such a view (see, e.g., Gilbert 2006), it isn't a view worth taking too seriously. I disagree because even if few explicitly endorse it, I think it is important to have a fuller understanding how it implicitly guides our thinking (through the model of the social contract tradition) and *why* it is inadequate.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the associationist line of thought in an account of groups, see Ritchie (2015, 2018), and on an alternative way of thinking about the structure of some groups, see Ritchie (2020).

Cordelli, Chiara, ed. *Structural Injustice: NOMOS LXVIII*. New York, NY: New York University Press, forthcoming.

associationism that assigns status functions to objects, e.g., in order to create social kinds such as money.<sup>13</sup>) Not everyone will comply with the plan, so our representatives also need to design ways to punish those who don't comply; and they need to have methods for adjusting the plan when there are unforeseen consequences, as things evolve under non-ideal conditions.

This model of society (over-simplified for present purposes) may seem out of date for many specialists in social ontology. However, I believe that it remains in the background of much thinking about societies, especially amongst those who focus on institutional infrastructure, e.g., legal and political theorists. Legislatures, bureaucrats, and judiciaries are very focused on intentional collective agency, and processes by which groups of individuals should decide *together* how to relate to each other.

### *B. Associations and "Group-Based" Oppression*

Without a doubt, an associationist approach has valuable tools for analyzing and explaining different parts of the social domain. Moreover, attention to the power of particular individuals in maintaining an oppressive social order is essential. Powerful individuals can utilize many strategies to exert direct power, and to exercise influence and authority over institutions. Nothing I say here should be read as denying that individuals wield power and often do so in ways that are extremely harmful and unjust. Our primary question, however, is how oppressive structures and systems reproduce themselves without central authority, and whether this sometimes happens without the form of human cooperation that collective intentionality requires.

It is also worth noting that associationism can go some way toward answering this question. There are several ways to account for the stability of injustice within such an ontology. Plausibly individuals tend to lose track of their joint intention to form a society and become narrowly self-interested; or they take themselves to be acting for good reasons but instead fail due to bias or confusion; or they think that following the plan provided by their representatives will achieve justice, but it won't, because the plan is flawed. We can also point to the rise of powerful individuals or corporate interests who come to control the strings of power, failures in education and media for promoting falsehoods and biased perspectives, and the like. These latter failings, of course, occur in the context of institutions and social sub-systems, which are often designed and managed through collective intentionality. In keeping with this, our efforts to achieve social justice should include individual interventions, such as adjusting the attitudes of individuals, and collective agreement on policy improvements and institutional change.

The associationist approach also allows us to see society as *structured*, so possibly *unjustly* structured. Recall that an association is more than a set of individuals doing things. In simple cases, the joint intention of the participants structures their responsiveness to each other. This is a minimal structure: Recall that two random people walking along the same path at the same time aren't a group because they lack mutual

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<sup>13</sup> The *reificationist* line thought emphasizes how collective intentionality *produces* social entities, e.g., collective agreement or acceptance transforms objects (pieces of paper, stones, shells, metal disks) into money (Searle 1995, 2010, et al). Social composition plausibly extends well beyond dollars, e.g., within this broad approach, Ásta (2018) argues that sex, gender, race, disability, and other social categories are conferred. (See also Burman 2007; 2023.) So society, even on the collective intentionality approach, is not just associations of individuals, but includes material artifacts. This is important because our collective action problems often involve coordination around and with the artifacts we have created.

coordination, but they can structure their walk by forming a joint agreement. More substantial associations are structured by rules or conventions: either the group members collectively set rules for themselves, or conventions are established by the collective intentionality of a separate group that constitute the structure (the constitutional creation of the Supreme Court). This allows that the biased beliefs of agents, the misguided aims of their joint intentions, or the dysfunctional conventions they agree upon, introduce injustice.

For example, let's grant that laws are part of a society's structure. Legislators may assume that women are not fully rational, or don't belong in the public sphere, (etc.) and so decide that they should not have the right to vote. The collective intentionality that establishes the law excluding women involves a false presupposition, with the result that women's civil rights are violated. This is a structural injustice derived from the false beliefs shaping the collective intentionality of the legislature.

Such decisions can also be part of a feedback loop: perhaps women are denied access to education beyond early primary level (if even that) because their roles don't seem to require it (or even permit it). Women's resulting lack of ability to understand or participate in sophisticated public debate seems to justify denying them voting rights and eligibility for public office, which reinforces their confinement to the private sphere, which makes more advanced education unnecessary, and so on. The consequences of bad decisions resting on false presuppositions can be substantial and self-reinforcing. Such wrongful decisions can also seem to be empirically justified: as a matter of fact, under conditions where women are uneducated and confined to the private sphere, most will lack important skills for public debate with men who are educated. Of course, a moment's reflection could reveal that the problem does not lie in women's capabilities, but in the social failure to provide adequate education. But it is hard to get perspective on what is broadly taken for granted (Mill 1869/1997).

This example of structural injustice is "group-based" because it is women, as a group, who suffer the wrongful treatment. And women suffer the wrongful treatment because of false or prejudicial attitudes on the part of those who have power make a law. This is a simple case. In more complex cases, the structural wrongs need not be quite so immediately tied to the attitudes of individuals currently involved; the wrong may be the consequence of a historical legacy of prejudice, e.g., contemporary lending practices that take wealth into account may be structurally harmful to non-White borrowers, even if the current lenders are not racially discriminatory, because of a history of racial prejudice in real estate practices. Let's call this the discrimination model of group-based oppression.

This is where law and politics become especially relevant, for on this approach, the basic structure of a democratic society is established through our collective intentionality, i.e., the structure consists in a set of laws and institutions that are the result of either the collective intentionality of our representatives (the state), or in a more theoretical sense, we the people (through our representatives) create the structure for ourselves. Those doing moral, political, and legal theory are in a special position, for their expertise is crucial in designing a better structure that will social justice.<sup>14</sup> The theoretical work, of course, is just the beginning, however, for an actual change in the structure requires that members of the collective also take up the new design and enact it together. I am completely convinced that this is part of what needs to be done; such interventions are essential.

I've suggested in this section that associationism *can* accommodate the idea that some structural elements of a society are unjust. But does it do all the work we need?

### III. Discrimination and Social Formation

#### A. *The Social Formation of Groups*

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, structures or institutions target (implicitly or explicitly) Asians for wrongful or harmful treatment because of their racial group membership. Assuming associationism, the source of the oppressive treatment lies somewhere, at some time (not necessarily in the present), in the collective intentionality of those responsible for the structure in question, e.g., their psychological dispositions to hold derogatory attitudes, or ill-will, towards a group, or to be negligent in taking the interests of (members of) the group into account (see, e.g., Garcia 1996; Blum 2002).

There is no question that such group-based oppression occurs. However, this model doesn't capture important cases. Class is the paradigm example. Illustrating the point simply, societies involve a division of labor. Within a capitalist economic system, some individuals own the means of production, and others provide labor. Those who sell their labor don't necessarily form a social group prior to their employment. Rather, their circumstances make it necessary for them to work for a wage,<sup>15</sup> and those who work for a wage are similarly positioned in the structure – they are exploited – and through this positioning, constitute the working class. We need not assume that capitalists have hostile or derogatory attitudes towards those they hire; we need not assume that workers identify with each other and develop class consciousness. But oppression of workers happens nevertheless because it is part of the structure of a capitalist economy that labor must be exploited to gain profit. It would be odd to say that capitalism discriminates “based on class,” as if there is a working class (independent of capitalism) and capitalists discriminate against them. A capitalist economy is an oppressive system that *produces* wage workers and capitalists. Let's call this the social formation model of social groups.<sup>16</sup> The example of class also suggests an alternative model “group based” oppression: the individuals constitute an oppressed group because they are similarly positioned in an unjust or wrongful structure.

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<sup>15</sup> This vulnerability itself is not sufficient to be a member of the working class because not all of those who are vulnerable take up wage labor. Some, of course, are unemployed.

<sup>16</sup> I have defended a view (2000) according to which racialization is an oppressive process, so racial groups are hierarchically situated. However, I am happy to allow that there are understandings of race and racialization according to which race is not a product of racialization, or that racialization is not necessarily oppressive. The oppressive forces of racialization may be contingent and temporary (see Jeffers 2019). NB: more should be said about how my account here both builds on and departs from my account of gender and of race in (2000). I can't say everything worth saying here, but my plan now is (roughly) to define genders in terms of kinds of bodily markings having to do with sex (also understood as constructed), ideologies in different contexts that create and interpret those markings, and social positioning. What genders there are and who belongs in what gender is then left to the participants in context. I allow for gender identity to be sufficient for being a gender because self-avowal can be a gender marker.

There are several important things to note about the social formation model. First, there are many kinds of social groups. Some theorists take social groups to involve a shared history or identity.<sup>17</sup> For example, Young (1990) suggests:

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. (44)

On the social formation model, such groups surely exist, but identification and self-identification need not be necessary. Marx, himself, distinguishes (at least) two senses of class:

The [French] small-holding peasants form an enormous mass whose members live in similar conditions but without entering into manifold relations with each other. Their mode of production isolates them from one another instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse.... Thus the great mass of the French nation is formed by the simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes. Insofar as millions of families live under conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests, and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a *class*<sub>1</sub>. Insofar as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests forms no community, no national bond, and no political organization among them, they do not constitute a *class*<sub>2</sub>. They are therefore incapable of asserting their class interest in their own name, whether through a parliament or a convention. (Marx 1852/1977, Ch. VII – my italics and subscripts.)

In this passage it appears that a *class*<sub>1</sub> is a group defined by its position within a structure of social relations (in Marx, this will be in relation to the means of production); members of a *class*<sub>1</sub> need not have a shared identity or bond. The French peasants need not have a conception of themselves as such; in fact, the class might exist even if there is no relevant conception of their social position available to anyone. *Class*<sub>2</sub> is plausibly what some commentators have characterized as a class “for itself,” i.e., its members have class consciousness and are organized in pursuit of their class interests. An identity group or cultural group of the sort Young has in mind in the passage quoted above seems to be a third kind of social group that doesn’t quite fit either of the Marxian conceptions of class described here, i.e., a group that has a shared identity or bond, but isn’t organized around their interests.<sup>18</sup> Social formation, as I understand it, need not result in anything more than a *class*<sub>1</sub> group, though, of course, a *class*<sub>1</sub> group can develop a shared culture and identity, forming a *class*<sub>1.5</sub> (thinking of Young), and with political class consciousness becomes a *class*<sub>2</sub> group.

Second, the social formation model allows that there are biological or cultural features that function as markers for the process of social group formation, e.g., a gendered division of labor relies on “sex” markers to differentiate who does what work, the military relies on uniform insignia (chevrons, bars, oak

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<sup>17</sup> I have also discussed this issue in Haslanger (2004).

<sup>18</sup> Some suggest that Marx elsewhere includes a conception of class – class “in itself” – more like Young’s conception of a social group). See, e.g., Poulantzas (1978) and Wright (1976).

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leaves, stars and such) to mark groups occupying role and rank.<sup>19</sup> Class formation sometimes relies on such markers as well – who is hired into what position in a capitalist economy depends on a variety of social cues, such as appearance, accent, dress/style – but it need not. It is also worth noting that a *class* group may only be an accidental consequence of other processes, e.g., the complement of a group may also be a group. This may be a process in constituting a group by “othering” them (Beauvoir 1997/1949, Frye 1996).

Third, as suggested above, it is compatible with the social formation model that members of the group are also discriminated against, e.g., wage workers and their children are denied certain educational opportunities because they can’t afford them or because they are considered “stupid” (Kadi 1999). There can also be an interaction between the discrimination model and the social formation model. For example, if a division of labor is needed, it is often convenient to assign roles to individuals based on markers that are already recognized and carry meaning (not necessarily pejorative). The role and the meaning of the marks may evolve together to create a status hierarchy. (See O’Connor 2019.) Nevertheless, the roles in the system and the meanings of the marks can each give rise to different kinds of harm or injustice.

Finally, not all social 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.

### *B. Different Questions with Different Answers*

I’ve argued so far that structural injustice can arise once discrimination is systematic, widespread, and institutionalized, e.g., in law; and it can also arise through social formation. As processes of injustice evolve, discrimination and formation are intertwined and loopy.<sup>20</sup> One might ask at this point why this distinction is important? What is at stake? As I see it, the distinction has implications both for explaining the persistence of injustice and finding possible routes for addressing it.

Let’s start with explanation. It is crucial to note that there can be different explanations of the same phenomenon, depending on the question at issue.<sup>21</sup> Consider the question

1) “Why are Gs oppressed [in such and such a way]?”

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<sup>19</sup> Not all “sex” markers are biological. They include cultural markers such as hair length, clothing, pitch of voice, and various forms of bodily decoration, augmentation, and reduction, including piercing, coloring, and shaping.

<sup>20</sup> In her comments, Alasia Nuti suggested, “that the more productive way to theorize the relationship between the associationist and structural understanding of society should be in terms of complementarity and co-existence, rather than as alternative models.” I accept this point and agree with her. It may have seemed that I am over-emphasizing the structural/social formation account, but I suspect that is because I am aiming to correct what I take to be an over-emphasis on the associationist account.

<sup>21</sup> I endorse an erotetic, i.e., question-based, approach to explanation. See Haslanger 2016a, 2016b. Also Anderson 1995; Garfinkel 1981; Risjord 2000.

Following Garfinkel (1981), this question is underspecified and supports several different readings once we make clear the focus and foils. For example, we might be asking (bold indicating focus and italics indicating foils):<sup>22</sup>

1<sub>G</sub>) Why are **the Gs** *rather than the Fs* oppressed?

Or

1<sub>O</sub>) Why are the G's **oppressed** *rather than responsible for their own bad choices?*

In articulating (1<sub>O</sub>) am assuming that a hallmark of oppression is that one is, by virtue of one's social position, faced with a choice architecture that is both hard to escape and disadvantageous or unfair in comparison to members of other groups.<sup>23</sup> To say that a group is oppressed is, in part, to call attention to the unfair or harmful constraints on their choices. These constraints can emerge as a result of discrimination, but those constraints come to be built into one's social reality

To answer question (1<sub>G</sub>) we are assuming that oppression occurs and are looking for a difference maker between Gs and Fs as candidates for the oppressed position. In many cases, the difference maker is our attitudes towards the two groups, e.g., why are **women** *rather than men* prevented from voting? Because women are believed to be irrational (or whatever), and men are not. The answer here will often be in terms of discrimination. Or the answer might point to some feature of one group that has emerged over time in a structure due to our attitudes towards them, e.g., why are Black and Brown people *rather than White people* disproportionately represented in the bottom 10% of the wealth distribution.<sup>24</sup> Because people have considered Black and Brown people inferior to White people and have denied them opportunities to purchase homes, attend elite schools, accumulate wealth.

To answer question (1<sub>O</sub>), we are looking for something different. We are asking for a difference between cases where people are stuck due to factors beyond their control, and cases where they bear (full) responsibility for their challenges. Our answer here is plausibly going to point to the ways in which the structure of society, the division of labor, accumulation of wealth, status hierarchy, and the like that give rise to unfairness or disparities in welfare for some groups. For example, why are women **confined to the home** *rather than given full access to public space?* Because the division of labor requires them to take care of the kids, etc. The answer here will often be in terms of social formation. Both answers are relevant to explaining women's oppression, and are consistent, because the questions have different foci and foils.

Another more contemporary example may help. Considering the dominant structure of the contemporary United States:

2) Why are **the elderly** *rather than the young* oppressed?

We might say that in our culture, youth is glorified and age is not respected. This is a matter of dominant attitudes about age. And if we ask,

3) Why are the elderly **oppressed** *rather than responsible for their own bad choices?*

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<sup>22</sup> Thanks to Yue Qi for helping me think through the relevant questions and suggesting an improvement to (1<sub>O</sub>)

<sup>23</sup> This is where a normative theory of social justice or emancipation would have to kick in. As I have noted before, I'm not attempting to provide that in this paper.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.peoplespolicyproject.org/2019/03/05/wealth-inequality-across-class-and-race-in-5-graphs/>

We might say that a capitalist economy (and other forms of the social contract (Anderson 2023)), renders those who are not productive (or potentially productive, as are children) expendable, marginal. According to Young's (1990) account of the five faces of oppression, "Marginals are people the system of labor cannot or will not use" (53) and such oppression occurs when "a whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination." (53) The harm of marginalization includes the fact that marginals are prevented from "[exercising] capacities in socially defined and recognized ways." (54) The idea is that the division of labor is a central structuring force that distributes social goods – not only income and wealth, but respect and recognition – and the elderly *as a social group, not as an age group*, is formed by how the structure of our contemporary society positions them.<sup>25</sup> So it is compatible to say both that there are structural factors that render the elderly socially marginal *and* that there are prejudicial attitudes towards them. These different factors interact, but they are distinct.

#### IV. Social Formation without Collective Intentionality

So we should ask, can the associationist model do justice to the social formation version of structural injustice, or oppression? If not, how should we account for social formation, and how should we fit an associationist account within a broader theory of society?

It would help to say a bit more, I think, about the social formation of oppressed groups. Let's return to the (economic) class example. When we ask, why is the working class **oppressed**, the answer surely has to be (at least partly) in terms of the economic mandates of the capitalist order. Simply put, exploitation of the worker is necessary for the capitalist to make a profit, which is necessary for the business to succeed. *The working class is produced by the operation of the system*. Where did the capitalist economy come from? I've already argued that it is not plausible that it emerged due to discrimination against a group (what group exactly?). Was it the result of some group of people collectively designing, implementing, and managing the evolution from feudalism? Who now has the central responsibility for managing the economy to keep it capitalist? *Of course*, there are more and less powerful people who influence how the economy evolves. But capitalism is not an association, and capitalists (or rentiers, or the working class) do not form a group with collective intentionality. They find themselves in a choice architecture that makes available these economic and political positions and the power that comes with them.

To understand oppression, we should be asking, how and why are social hierarchies – like class hierarchies – formed? Let's move to another example. Consider chattel slavery in the United States. The structure of chattel slavery produced a class of people – African slaves, their descendants, and those who are presumed to be descendants – who have suffered miserably. This has involved a process of racialization. If we ask: why did racialized slavery occur (*not* the question, why were Black people rather than White/Asian/Native people racialized in the slave trade), we have to look at the economic, political, geographic, and cultural conditions at the time, i.e., the system that produced the social group *Negro* (or *Colored*, or *Black*). This is a question taken up in social theory.<sup>26</sup> The oppression of Africans did not occur

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<sup>25</sup> One might say that many people in their 80s are not *elderly* because they are so active, socially engaged, productive, etc.

<sup>26</sup> The literature on this is, of course, extensive. See, e.g., Du Bois (1899/2007, 1935/2017), Robinson (1983); Omi & Winant (1986); Glenn 2015; Fraser 2022. There is related work on the oppressive social formation of other social

because there was racial discrimination against Black people; and the wrong was not just that the markers of race were used in populating the class of slaves and their descendants. Surely the more fundamental problem lies in the injustices produced by the system that constituted (and maintains) the oppressed racial group. As far as I can see, discrimination alone doesn't provide the tools to unpack broad structural formations and how they are oppressive. We need more than psychology. Social theory is essential.

However, one might object, insisting that collective intentionality has a foundational role to play in creating and maintaining the capitalist, patriarchal, and White supremacist social order. So let's consider whether sociality is grounded in collective intentionality by considering an example that plausibly involves sociality, but not collective intentionality. A young child is eating rice by having her mother feed it to her with a spoon. The child reaches into the bowl and grabs rice and puts her hand in her mouth. The mother puts the spoon in the child's hand and helps her scoop the rice to her mouth. Perhaps the child fusses and drops the spoon and goes back to using her hand. But over time, she takes up the spoon on her own and uses it to feed herself. The child has learned a social practice. In other cultures, one doesn't use spoons to eat rice. What utensils we use in order to eat is something learned from others in one's cultural milieu; eating with a spoon is a social practice. And yet, the child and the mother are not engaged in joint agency in the relevant sense, either during the learning process or after the child has mastered it, for the young child and mother are not collectively intending to do anything *together*.<sup>27</sup>

Although in the case of parenting children, we often teach social practices, active teaching is not required to learn a social practice. As Kim Sterelny (2012) points out,

A second cognitive precondition of cooperative foraging is the existence of a flow of information across the generations. Cultural learning of this kind can begin and can become important without the active cooperation of the source of information. Agents leak information in their everyday activities. Moreover, they often adaptively structure the learning environment of their young as a by-product of their own utilitarian activities. (12-13)

In other words, it is possible to convey cultural information and shape the agency of others without intending to do so. Juveniles watch us, imitate us, and experiment with the tools (or toys) we leave around. Learning a language is similar. Through social interaction, children learn language from their caregivers, much of it without effort on the part of the child, or their caregivers. It would be hard to deny that linguistic skills are social skills, and they are plausibly a precondition of much collective action (and cognition). Clearly this conception of the social based in social (or cultural) learning is quite different from the one presupposed in the collective intentionality literature.<sup>28</sup> But a broader conception of the social enables us to better understand the capacities for sociality in non-human animals, the evolution of distinctively human sociality (both historically and developmentally), and the social preconditions for collective intentionality.

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categories such as ethnicity, disability, sexuality, e.g., on gender see Federici (2019), Folbre (2020), and other socialist feminists.

<sup>27</sup> It is generally agreed in the experimental psychology literature that a 10-12 month old child, does not have the ability to attribute mental states to the mother. I find Breheny (2006) offers a helpful and nuanced discussion of this point.

<sup>28</sup> The animal cognition literature is valuable on these issues, e.g., Andrews (2020); Andrews et al (2024); also work on the regulative function of folk psychology: McGeer (2007); Haslanger (2019); Zawidzki (2013).

Plausibly, collective intentionality is scaffolded, surely by language, but also by other social practices that one learns through simple imitation and trial and error. We can become fluent in social practices without instruction, and practices set up choice architectures: the practice scaffolds what each of us might want, what the options are, and how we collectively decide what to do *together*. Come on over and we can take a walk around the pond, or perhaps up the hill? I have a map, so why don't you pick the destination, and I'll navigate?<sup>29</sup> Once a practice is established, collective intentionality is not required to engage in it: an individual can take a walk alone. Even taking a walk alone is engaging in a social practice, scaffolded by the social context.

Culture is not a set of rules and isn't played like a game; it wasn't designed by someone (or some group), and no one is in charge (though some people have more power to influence it than others). Peasants and members of the working class are typically born into a social position, e.g., within feudalism or capitalism, with a limited choice architecture; they learn the relevant patterns and practices of social life, and eventually take up their economic roles. It is similar with other categories: children are born into a world with a gendered division of labor; they learn the patterns and practices of gender and become men and women. Children are born into a racial hierarchy; they learn the patterns and practices of race, and become racialized.

People become people only when they enter into culture, which is to say, only when culture enters into them, and becomes them, when they are programmed with and hence constituted by tools of understanding created by a culture at a certain point in history. Through existence in history, which is existence in culture, people obtain and incorporate cultural tools, and these become as much a part of them as their arms and legs. (Balkin 1998, 18)

The collective activities that occur in institutions and the actions performed by our representatives, such as passing a law or implementing a policy, are also socially scaffolded. Some of the scaffolding is, of course, conventional or institutional, e.g., there are designated steps that must be taken in order to create or amend a company's set of rules and regulations. But the possibility of agreeing upon rules, interpreting them, and following them, depends on fluency in the cultural milieu, or to use a more philosophically resonant term, the form of life. Societies consist in networks of social relations that evolve, but are structured to reproduce themselves without central authority, and do so whether we want them to or not.<sup>29</sup>

These points about collective intentionality raise doubts about the associationist model of society. First, the model, as I've described it, presupposes fairly sophisticated forms of mind-reading and cognitive coordination that is not available to young humans. The development of these skills requires scaffolding by social learning which does not, itself, require collective intentionality. Social learning not only happens in childhood, but is necessary for social fluency throughout life. Second, an associationist model suggests that the coordination that is needed to build and maintain a society is only achieved through collective intentionality, i.e., our ability to live together depends on our ability to live *together*. However, collective

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<sup>29</sup> Bowker and Star (1999), in their impressive book on the value-ladenness of classification, argue, "In the past 100 years [and more!], people in all lines of work have jointly constructed an incredible, interlocking set of categories, standards, and means for interoperating infrastructural technologies. We hardly know what we have built. No one is in control of infrastructure; no one has the power centrally to change it. To the extent that we live in, on, and around this new infrastructure, it helps form the shape of our moral, scientific, and esthetic choices" (319).

intentionality is not necessary for either social agency or coordination.<sup>30</sup> Third, and most importantly for our purposes here, the associationist model lacks the resources to understand the dynamics and the durability of social systems.

Recall the first set of our starting questions: How and why do oppressive systems reproduce themselves? In particular, why are they so durable even in the face of significant and ongoing efforts to change them? Even if we drop the requirement of collective intentionality in the formation of social practices and social groups and, instead, just rely on social learning, discrimination is not the answer. Discrimination, as an attitude towards a group and its members, can explain why one set of people rather than another function in a particular (hierarchical) social position or category. But it is not adequate to explain how a system produces social groups and the structure of social roles and positions that sustain and reproduce it. I believe this requires a systems approach with a focus on co-integrated meso-level systems.

## V. Social Systems<sup>31</sup>

But what is the alternative to the associationist model of the social domain? In this section, I will sketch a different picture of how societies work. I grant that associationist models capture much of our cooperative activity – what we “do together” in a rich sense. But *coordination* does not require *cooperation*. After all, ants and bees coordinate skillfully and quite flexibly without the metacognition required by collective intentionality. Much of human behavior is not intentional action and is not based on reasons; and yet we are able to coordinate in ways quite similar to our non-human relatives.

My proposal for answering the questions posed at the start, relies on the idea that societies are complex dynamic systems. In particular, I’ll argue that agency, culture, and material conditions are systematically interdependent and the dynamics at play in each domain are relevant to how a system evolves. My broad aim is to sketch a conception of structural, or systemic, injustice that is a robust alternative to a discrimination model. (Of course, much more must be said to flesh it out.)

### A. Practices

The social ontology I favor is best understood through an account of social practices, so let’s begin there.<sup>32</sup> Very roughly, social practices enable us to coordinate around things taken to have (+/-) value. They do so by relying on a set of shared social meanings: a grab bag of tools for default signaling, generalizing, inferring. Humans and non-human animals depend on such tools in their quotidian activities (e.g., Skyrms 2004). I call this grab bag a *cultural technē*. Elements of a *cultural technē* may include, e.g., simple signals (pink means *girl*; a chutter means *beware snake!*); shared concepts and associated default assumptions (marriage is between one man and one woman); narrative tropes (first comes marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage); and common metaphor and metonymy (man : woman :: reason : passion). These tools enable us to interpret each other and the world we interact with:

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<sup>30</sup> Non-linguistic animals have social practices too!

<sup>31</sup> In this section, as well, I draw on material I’ve published elsewhere, e.g., Haslanger (2018, 2023b, 2024). My own work on complex systems and their relevance for social justice has been inspired by Sahar Heydari Fard. See, e.g., (Heydari Fard 2022, 2024)

<sup>32</sup> For more on practice theory, see Ortner 1982; Reckwitz 2002; Rouse 2006; Jaeggi 2018.

...users of culture will form a semiotic community – in the sense that they will recognize the same set of oppositions [i.e., social meanings] and therefore be capable of engaging in mutually meaningful symbolic action. To use the ubiquitous linguistic analogy, they will be capable of using the "grammar" [and lexicon!] of the semiotic system to make understandable "utterances."  
(Sewell 2005, 49)

It is important to note that a cultural technē is a set of *public* tools, like a language's lexicon and grammar.<sup>33</sup> As a whole, a cultural technē is a broad grab-bag of meanings, but particular practices rely on distinct parts. Social fluency involves competency in a variety of practices – we behave differently at work and at home, at a religious event or a barbeque. Social roles – such as gender roles – have norms specific to such contexts, but also cut across contexts (Witt 2011). Fluency in how and when to use what tool is a kind of cultural know-how.

The tools in a cultural technē mark things as having (+/-) value and guide us in managing and distributing them. I call things taken to have (+/-) value *resources*. Before penicillium was even noticed, it was not a resource, in my sense. Under an earlier cultural technē penicillium (the mold) was negatively valued; under our current technē, it is positively valued.<sup>34</sup> Before, identifying something as a penicillium called for eliminating it; now it calls for reproducing and marketing it.

The local cultural technē (at least in the central cases) structures our agency through engagement in social practices. On my view,

Social practices are patterns of learned behavior that enable us [living beings] to coordinate as members of a group in creating, using, distributing, managing, maintaining, and eliminating a resource(s), due to mutual responsiveness to each other's behavior and the resource(s) in question, as interpreted through shared meanings, i.e., the cultural technē. (Haslanger 2018, 245)

Note that practices are not all rule governed. And they are not driven or manifested by purely cognitive processes; they have affective dimensions, e.g., there are norms about what emotions are apt within a practice. Note further that not all practices are institutionalized. I am open to different uses of the term 'institution,' however, I prefer to think of an institution as a cluster of rule-governed practices that are managed by an authority. This is why institutions are often thought of as designed. But most social practices are not designed: no one designed English, though theoretical terms and other expressions are introduced by design. And no one designed many of our practices that concern the heteronormative family and other cultural practices organizing us around birth, death, coming of age, leisure, food, and spiritual renewal.

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<sup>33</sup> The lexicon and grammar of a language are a public system of meanings that are "taken up" by individuals who are fluent in the language. On my account, a language, or system of meanings, is not set of mental representations, though those who are fluent in a language grasp the system and rely on it to coordinate and communicate. (Cf. a formal language is a system of signs that includes a syntax and semantics but may not be taken up by anyone.)

<sup>34</sup> The term 'resource' is associated with things assumed to have positive value. However, I follow the tradition of Giddens (1984) and Sewell (1992) according to which not all resources have positive value; we need to coordinate around harmful things as much as around good things.

## B. Structures and Systems

How are social practices related to structures and systems? Social relations – the relation between parent and child, between teacher and student, landlord and tenant, worker and boss – are formed in social practices. And *networks of social relations* constitute *social structures*. *Social structures* are *the skeletons of social systems*. In describing the relation between structures and systems in systems biology, Hiroaki Kitano says:

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)

In other words, if, as suggested above, social theory is to explain how societies “emerge, change, interact, and collapse, at different levels of analysis,” it needs to attend not only to structures – networks of relations – but to system dynamics.

I mentioned above that structures are like the skeletons of systems. So let’s turn to systems. A system is a set of things working together in a way that forms a whole. There are different ways to model the relationship between systems and structures. I think of structures as networks of relations that hold between nodes, and systems are dynamic, historically specific, instantiation of structures.<sup>35</sup> Two structures may be of the same type – there are similar nodes and relations - but the dynamics that manage their evolution differ. For example, two families may consist of two heterosexual parents and four biological children of the parents of the same ages, living together. The two families plausibly exemplify the same type of structure. The token family systems may differ, however, because of the internal dynamics between parents, and between parents and children.

There are, of course, different kinds of systems. *Complex systems*, in contrast to *simple systems*, 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).

- A complex system has sub-systems, but isn’t decomposable into *independent* sub-systems or modules. Instead, the components of the system depend for their capacities on other components, in ways that involve feedback loops. For example, in the human body, the circulatory system and the endocrine system are co-integrated. In the contemporary United States, the criminal justice system is co-integrated with child protective services (Roberts 2022), which is co-integrated with the educational system. As a result, intervention in one system has extensive and often unexpected ripple effects. Theorizing the dynamics of such co-integrated systems can help us locate tipping points for positive feedback loops.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> It is helpful to distinguish systems and structures because systems overlap and interact with each other, and the consequences of this interaction matter for evaluating and intervening in the structures, e.g., is the practice of marriage, itself, a problem, or is it only a problem when instantiated in *this* historically specific social system?

<sup>36</sup> For more information on positive and negative feedback loops, see: [https://www.albert.io/blog/positive-negative-feedback-loops-biology/#Positive\\_Feedback\\_Loops](https://www.albert.io/blog/positive-negative-feedback-loops-biology/#Positive_Feedback_Loops)

- Complex systems can appear chaotic because the interactions between the parts are non-linear and unpredictable. But nevertheless, the whole displays patterns and regularities that can be probabilistically predicted. They are difficult to disrupt, but small changes can cascade and have a big effect.<sup>37</sup> The economy is surely a dynamically self-organizing system involving production, consumption, capital accumulation and investment. Regulation is part of the system, and makes a difference, but doesn't control it.
- In complex systems, the structure and environment of the system can impose constraints on components in a way that shapes them to fit the structure (think of adaptation in ecosystems and niche construction). In the case of social systems, individual agents are shaped as social subjects to coordinate effectively. As a result, our practical consciousness is predisposed to notice some things and not others and our responses are shaped to be socially legible. Much of our behavior is not easily changed, even in response to incentives; our social roles become part of who we are.

On this model, we take up practices as we internalize the relevant part of the cultural technē. The practices shape our relations to each other and to the world; our perceptions, attention, responsiveness (desires, emotions), movements, actions, etc., are prompted and pruned as we learn the demands of coordination. There are at least three broad factors that explain a social system's stability and change, i.e., factors that are relevant to the system's dynamics: physical factors (what is physically possible, including biological, geographic, and demographic conditions), semiotic factors (the "logics" and "grammars" of social meaning, social power, and the socio-cultural history), and human capacities, e.g., for language, knowledge, creativity, and agency. These are interdependent, but also relatively autonomous.<sup>38</sup>

## VI. Integration, Stability, and Change

I've sketched an account of social practices that relies on a set of public social meanings, or what I call a cultural technē, to organize us collectively in response to the material conditions. Social relations are shaped both by the world and the tools we have for understanding it and each other as we participate in social practices. A cultural technē provides tools not only for communication and coordination, but also for interpreting things as valuable (or not). An unjust social practice, or structure, might fail to provide us the semiotic tools to interpret and value things aptly, or it might organize us around what's valuable (or not) in unjust ways, e.g., by distributing it unfairly. Moreover, what position one occupies in a social system is not necessarily a matter of choice, for the social meanings available in a culture may mark and

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<sup>37</sup> For more on tipping points and cascades, see, e.g., [https://www.sesync.org/resources/introduction-cascading-effects-social-ecological-and-socio-environmental#:~:text=Examples%20of%20social%2Dcascading%20effects,of%20reinforcing%20\(positive\)%20feedbacks](https://www.sesync.org/resources/introduction-cascading-effects-social-ecological-and-socio-environmental#:~:text=Examples%20of%20social%2Dcascading%20effects,of%20reinforcing%20(positive)%20feedbacks).

<sup>38</sup> See Sewell: "From the fact that all social action is meaningful, it does not necessarily follow that social action is shaped by nothing but meaning. Other orders of constraints and pressures (for example, abundance or scarcity of resources, gross disparities of coercive force, or the spatial locations and physical mobilities of actors and resources), which may themselves be the outcomes of semiotically motivated action, regularly influence social action in ways that escape the awareness of actors and are not easily accounted for by semiotic analysis alone. I think a program of cultural research that attempts to utilize and grapple with the insights of, say, economic or geographical or demographic analysis, will be stronger than one that ignores or disdains all analytical traditions other than the semiotic." (Sewell 2005, 164-5)

assign individuals with a body like yours, or parents like yours, or skills like yours, to particular position in the practice(s), like it or not, and individuals are shaped to take up these practices willingly and find them valuable (Haslanger 2019). Often it is hard to even imagine alternatives.<sup>39</sup>

Our concern here, however, has been how a systems approach helps us explain oppression, and specifically, its durability. So far I've simply gestured at the idea that economic and socio-political forces explain the formation of the working class and the exploitation of the worker, the racialization and enslavement of Africans, and the gendered division of labor. Although at some very broad and abstract level, speaking of capitalism, White supremacy, or patriarchy can be useful, even in those cases making reference to such broad dynamics is a very weak form of explanation.<sup>40</sup> This is because, (i) there are many different forms of capitalist economies and racial and gendered hierarchies that vary across socio-historical contexts, and (ii) in any specific context, multiple forces will be at work, and understanding how they are interacting will be important to explain the phenomenon. But an important level of social analysis and intervention is at the meso-level in each social context: healthcare systems, transportation systems, educational systems, family systems, political systems, legal systems.<sup>41</sup> As a result, finding the right level of explanation will be important to analyze different forms of oppression.<sup>42</sup>

We should hesitate here a moment: those who adopt an associationist approach to society tend to be methodological individualists and so maintain that social phenomena can and should be *explained* in terms of individuals and their interactions (see fn. 2). What is this talk of structural and systems explanation? If it is intelligible, shouldn't it be reducible to explanation in terms of individuals and their interactions? I have

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<sup>39</sup> Alasia Nuti emphasizes in her comments the importance of imagination for social change and recommends prefigurative politics as a strategy. Political imagination is essential, and a huge challenge given the power of ideology (Haslanger 2021). I support prefigurative politics, i.e., the idea that our activism is guided by the values and principles that we are aiming to achieve, under some interpretations, and to an extent. One concern is that it is difficult to work prefiguratively in coalition with others whose values are not fully aligned with yours. But coalition politics - and the learning it enables - is, to my mind, necessary to achieve justice.

<sup>40</sup> Strictly speaking, given the social ontology I favor, it is misleading to speak of capitalism, patriarchy, and White supremacy as systems. Instead, I prefer to characterize them as dynamics that are at work in a variety of systems. For example, a health care system may have multiple dynamics, one of them being capitalist. Nonetheless, I sometimes use the term 'capitalism' as a way of referring to capitalist dynamics. See Haslanger (2023a; 2024).

<sup>41</sup> In her commentary, Virginia Montouvalou raised the important question whether the state, and the law in particular, has a more significant role to play in creating and challenging social structures than I have acknowledged. I agree that the state is a profoundly important system, and much can be done to address structural injustice through the state. My point in this paper is to argue that the state is one system among others that manage social organization, and the co-integration of the state and other systems is crucial to understanding the durability of injustice. See also Haslanger 2025.

<sup>42</sup> Elsewhere I have distinguished the micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis, thinking of material systems such as health care systems, education systems, food production systems, and the like as at the meso level. (Haslanger 2023a). However, this is a simplification because there are many ways of individuating systems within the meso level, relevant to the question one is asking. Alasia Nuti asks, in her comments, how my approach deals with the fact that many oppressive systems are transnational. This is an important question. On my view, recognizing that, e.g., our food production system is global, and the ways in which it is also colonial, White supremacist, and patriarchal, does offer an insight into the global structures of domination. Gender takes different forms in different global and historical contexts. But to see how gender works, we need to see how it is embedded in every system and how those systems are connected transnationally.

discussed and defended both structural explanations and system explanations elsewhere (2016b; 2020a; 2023b), but let's briefly consider an example.

Why do women continue to do most of the carework – and work of social reproduction, more generally (over millennia!). In the contemporary context, the economic and material practices that place women at a disadvantage in the workplace should be clear enough: women are paid less and are often positioned in jobs that carry less prestige and power, in part due to the demands on them as caregivers. As a result, if childcare options are limited (grandparents far away, decent childcare expensive, a special needs child) then it is rational for a woman with a well-employed partner to quit her job. One might think of this in terms of discrimination, e.g., the discriminatory assumptions that women are supposed to be primary caregivers. No doubt individual discrimination against women and mothers occurs. But the social formation of the woman employee is a systematic part of patriarchal capitalism. To put it crudely, capitalism needs unpaid labor to produce (sex, pregnancy, childbirth, infant care) and sustain the worker: this is the work of social reproduction, including not only sexual reproduction, but also,

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)

The gendered division of labor is not outside of the economy, but is part of it, and the social formation of women as caregivers, i.e., as “workers” in the domain of social reproduction, is as necessary to the system as is the social formation of the working class.

This is not to say, however, that capitalist dynamics are the only ones at issue in the formation of women as a group (after all, women as a class predated capitalism). However, focusing here on the current social formation (and the example under discussion), let's consider briefly the interaction between practices of infant caregiving and practices of wage labor. Practices of infant caregiving rely on a gendered cultural technē that positions women in a network of other women – mothers, sisters, aunts, nanas, neighbors, friends, nurses, lactation specialists – who scaffold a mother's agency in learning how to care for a newborn (whether or not she is a biological mother). In taking up the practices of mothering, gendered scripts are invoked and reinforced, default assumptions about the proper roles of mothers and fathers are repeated, specialized knowledge and skills are conveyed. One of the great strengths of patriarchal formations (at least when they function at their best) is that in maintaining a gendered division of labor, they also provide the basis for extensive support networks and mutual aid. Understandably, those whose agency has been deeply shaped in community by mothering practices often come to identify with them and encourage their daughters to do as well. These networks are not available to everyone, however, and are much less accessible to men; because the cultural technē is so gendered for infant caregiving, the practices aren't always easily transposable across gender. Even in heteronormative families deeply committed to gender equity, most of the time, mothers and fathers have different roles. As Cailin O'Connor has argued, however, those who are tasked with caregiving are systematically disadvantaged in bargaining, for they typically will refuse a bargain that threatens to harm their dependent. This positions them to be manipulated and exploited.

Can the associationist model of the social domain capture the dynamics of such looping effects? I'm not sure I've seen a model that even attempts to do so. Perhaps this is because such structures and systemic effects are not visible from within the approach? By moving to another level of analysis, explanations are more robust and stable.<sup>43</sup>

So each [partitioning of the phenomena] lays a grid or mesh over the possible phenomena, and corresponding to each mesh there is a conception of what the object of explanation is. We can...insist on one mesh or another. But the choice is not entirely arbitrary. There is a general fact which must be taken into account. As the mesh becomes finer and finer, that is, as the equivalence classes become smaller and more numerous, the resulting object, and hence the resulting explanation, becomes less and less stable...Clearly, there are some pragmatic, practical factors at work. Yet the situation is not completely determined by these factors, for these practical demands must be reconciled with the nature of the phenomena themselves and with the stability demands of good scientific explanation (Garfinkel 1981, 31-2).

Structural explanation attends to the network of social relations, e.g., between the parents, their extended family, friends, and neighbors, their bosses, their coworkers, their bank account and savings, and more, that influence not the parents' decision, but the pattern of choices that women make in similar circumstances.

To understand the dynamics of the pattern, and how it remains stable, it helps to analyze the systems at issue. At the meso level, sub-systems of the social formation are co-integrated, i.e., they each influence and depend on the others. The problem of gendered caregiving involves capitalist dynamics and patriarchal dynamics along with the biological dynamics of infant needs and social dynamics of self-respect. Infants need full-time care and frequent feeding by an adult (or nearly adult); adults not only need food and shelter, but also meaningful affiliation and respectful belonging in a community (Smith 1776/1994, Book V, Ch. II, Part II); the capitalist economy demands that employers keep wages low; and the patriarchal division of labor defaults to assigning caregiving to women. In poor and racially marginalized communities, there will be additional dynamics, e.g., in some Black and Brown communities, women are more likely to be employed in the formal economy and caregiving is done by a broader community. In poor communities, it is not an option for one parent to quit their job, for a single paycheck is not a living wage. And single parent families face obvious challenges. The interaction of these dynamics – as they are manifested in different sociohistorical settings – can be used to explain the durability of the pattern.

We started this section with the question whether structural and systemic explanations are intelligible, and if so, how they are preferable to individualistic explanations. Although much more could be said on this topic, I've argued that different kinds of explanation are relevant to different levels of analysis, and when we are looking at broad social patterns in the phenomena, structural explanations are more robust, and system explanations – bringing in dynamical factors – are essential to understand the durability of such patterns. Individual agency is scaffolded by material and semiotic structures that are embedded in social

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<sup>43</sup> There are various differences between robustness and stability (of systems, and of explanations) that are not significant for our purposes. However, for our purposes, the issue is whether and to what extent an explanation remains apt given perturbations in the system. See Jen 2003; Baras 2022, Ch. 4.

practices; the dynamics that these structures manifest are not the result of collective intentionality and are not always under our control.

A further advantage of such explanations is that they can provide resources to identify leverage points for transformative social change. Changing the material conditions and the semiotic frameworks of agency are as important as, and sometimes a precondition for, changing what people choose to do. Effectively intervening in one structure or sub-system requires a consideration of the others for the dynamics that produce them are systemically linked. Yet 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. But questions about how to intervene in social systems to prompt transformative change are ones for another day.

## **VII. Conclusion**

This is a paper about structural injustice, or oppression. I've argued that in order to understand structural injustice, we need social theory. Social structures function to produce and sustain injustice, and we need social theory to understand how they do this; that is, we need a theory that explains how social structures and social systems, whether good or bad, do what they do. I've argued that some legitimate questions we have about patterns of systemic and durable injustice should be answered by giving structural explanations, and to appreciate the durability of injustice, our explanations should take into account both material and semiotic dynamics. As far as I can see, these cannot be captured within an associationist social ontology or by relying simply on a discrimination model of oppression. I've covered a lot of ground, drawing on different literatures and I'm sure that there are substantial gaps in the discussion. I look forward to learning more about where the gaps and confusions are.

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