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Structural Responsibility

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I argue that current normative discussions of the responsibility for structural injustice are marred by an inadequate socio-theoretical view of structures and their functioning. This view reduces the relation between structures and actions to one of constraint: structures mainly inhibit transformative action; transformative action can only come from outside structures. I offer an alternative view of structures and their functioning that, drawing on and extending Sewell's and Haslanger's conceptions of structures and Arendt's view of action, shows that actions are structurally and publicly constituted—they acquire social meaning in relation to structures, in a process of public interpretation—which is why they can transform the structures where they originate. Responsibility to dismantle unjust structures should then be understood as "structural responsibility": responsibility to act from one's structural position in ways that can disrupt the mechanisms of structural maintenance.

INTRODUCTION

Discussions of structural injustice have proliferated in the last two decades in response to Iris Young's "social connection model of responsibility" (Young 2004; 2006) for "structural injustice." (Young 2011).[1] I argue that normative discussions of the responsibility for structural injustice are marred by an inadequate socio-theoretical view of structures and their functioning and, consequently, by an inadequate view of action.

While they theorize injustice as structural, theorists of structural injustice do not extend a structural analysis to their understanding of the actions that can discharge responsibility. This asymmetry is explained by a mistaken view of the relation between structures and actions that reduces this relation to one of constraint. On this view, structures reproduce themselves by constraining actions taken from inside them—actions that can only reproduce, not transform, structures. Only action from outside structures can transform them and fulfill responsibilities for structural injustice; acting against unjust structures requires transcending them. This view of action is not only inaccurate; it also obscures the transformative power of structurally constituted agents.

I discuss Tommie Shelby's (2016; 2007) view of the obligations of the victims of racism as an exception to this approach because Shelby understands these obligations as belonging to structurally constituted agents. However, Shelby's view obscures the transformative power of structurally constituted agents too, which is due, I argue, to the absence of a theoretical account of structures and their functioning.

I offer such a view of structures and their functioning that, drawing on and extending William Sewell's (1992) and Sally Haslanger's (2015; 2016; 2017a; 2017b; 2022; 2024) conceptions of structures and Hannah Arendt's (1958) view of action, shows that structures can be transformed from inside. On this view, actions are not only constrained and enabled (as Sewell, following Anthony Giddens [1979], argues and, following them, Young [2011] acknowledges), but also *constituted* by structures. Actions are structurally and publicly constituted; that is, they acquire social meaning in the processes of normal structural functioning, which are processes of interpretation of the structures within which actions originate and involve the agents' publics. With Arendt, this account of action emphasizes the transformative possibilities of action; against Arendt, it shows these transformative possibilities are enhanced, not closed off by the structural constitution of action. This is also an account of agents' "structural power," their power to transform the structures from within which they act.

These structural powers should be central to our theorizing responsibilities for unjust structures. Responsibility for structural injustice is itself structural. It belongs to agents not simply positioned in,[2] but *constituted by*[3] unjust structures, because it is as such that agents have the power to transform structures.

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[1] McKeown (2021) offers a review of this literature.

[2] I do not take issue with the claim, common in the literature, that differently positioned persons have different responsibilities, but with some of its justifications—that invoke the benefits the privileged receive (Cudd 2006, 195; Young 2011, 145; Nuti 2019, 190) or some agents' differential power to influence unjust outcomes (Young 2011, 144; Nuti 2019, 186–8; McKeown 2024, 75)—for obscuring the structural constitution of action.

[3] This is different than (and independent from) saying that *subjects* are constituted by structures. My claim—that the (social) meanings of our actions depend on structures—neither requires nor implies claims about subject formation.

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Agents exercise this power when acting in nonconforming ways, ways that disrupt[4] structural maintenance. Agents have the responsibility to exercise this power—to act as occupants of their structural positions in ways that disrupt their structural position and thus the structure. I illustrate the notion of "structural responsibility" by reading the "wages for housework" campaign (Federici 2012a; 2012b; Dalla Costa 1973) as a call to action that addresses agents as occupants of structural positions, not social roles, which distinguishes my view from Robin Zheng's (2018) "role-ideal model of responsibility."

STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE, UNSTRUCTURED ACTION

This section argues that influential theorists of structural injustice do not extend the structural aspects of their analysis of injustice to their discussions of responsibility because they fail to understand that actions fulfilling responsibility are structurally constituted. I focus on Ann Cudd's and Young's views for two reasons. First, they develop accounts of both the structural character of injustice and of responsibility.[5] Second, their work has been widely influential.[6]

Oppression, the structural injustice Cudd (2006) theorizes, is a harm suffered by social groups because of institutional, unjustifiably coercive practices that place other groups in privileged positions (25). Cudd raises an objection to her account of the duty to resist oppression (195–201): resistance is impossible given that oppressive practices constrain actions (187). In reply, Cudd argues that her account of oppression makes resistance possible because it understands group membership to be externally imposed, not something individuals identify with. Resistance would be impossible if individuals could not understand the world except according to these externally imposed constraints, falling prey to "false consciousness or deformed desires." But they do not. They can separate themselves from these constraints, think outside the boxes created by group membership, and act against them (188).

On this view, structures primarily constrain action. To undermine the normal, oppressive functioning of structures, actions need to escape these constraints and originate outside structures. This overlooks the possibility that actions' structural location enhances rather than undermining their transformative power.[7]

Cudd's view may seem an outlier. Young (2011) argues that structures are produced in action (59–62) and that actions are both constrained (53–6) and enabled (60) by structures. Yet, those features of action fall out of the picture when Young theorizes responsibilities for structural injustice. On Young's (2011) "social connection model,"[8] everyone whose actions contribute to structural injustice shares responsibility for the injustice. Unlike collective responsibility, which belongs to collective agents, responsibility for structural injustice is shared: Each individual bears it personally, but together with others (109–10). Only by joining with others in collective action can one discharge it (111–2). This joining together with others makes this responsibility political (112).

It is at this point that Young's account begins to depart from understanding action in relation to structures. For by political—a sense Young attributes to Arendt (1963)—Young (2011) means "public communicative engagement with others for the sake of organizing our relationships and coordinating our actions most justly" (112). An act is political when it is public and is aimed at getting others to join it (90). Trying to persuade others that homelessness is a matter of justice or to join campaigns to transform the practices that cause it are political actions.

Thus understood, political actions are taken by individuals as political actors, a status shared across structural positions.[9] As political actors, agents use their power of communication and persuasion, powers they have irrespective of their position. They act on levers accessible to all—institutions of government or civil society institutions (112)—not on levers accessible in virtue of their structural position. Actions that can discharge responsibility are not structurally constituted.

This analysis may seem to conflict with the social connection model's central claim that individuals bear responsibility for unjust structures because their actions contribute to structural reproduction (105, 107). For Young, this objector may argue, actions are structured because they sustain structures (195); acting in conformity with structural rules reproduces structures (60–1).

However, this shows only that, for Young, the connection between actions and structures provides *the reason* for our responsibility. It does not show that the actions discharging responsibility are structurally constituted. We are responsible because our actions, jointly and cumulatively, cause[10] unjust structures (105). But this connection is not a guide to which actions we should take to discharge our responsibility.

[4] In the course of making a different argument for disruptive politics—that it can disturb "white ignorance" (Mills 2017)—Hayward (2017, 403–7) defines disruptive politics as "withdrawing cooperation in social relations" (Piven 2006, 23, cited in Hayward 2017, 405).

[5] Haslanger's work is not the target of my criticism because it theorizes structures, not responsibility for them.

[6] See McKeown (2021) on Young's influence and Vasanthakumar (2020) on Cudd's. For the debate generated by Cudd's view on the natural duty to resist see Harvey (2010), Hay (2011), Silvermint (2013; 2018), and Vasanthakumar (2018). Young's earlier work (Young 1990; 1997; 2005) is significantly different both in its approach (as Gordon [2024, 187–8] argues), and influence over the structural injustice literature, which rarely mentions it. A rare exception, Nuti (2019, 83–94) discusses Young (1997).

[7] I made a similar point about Cudd's view in Marin (2017, 174n20).

[8] See McKeown (2018) on the meaning of Young's "social connection."

[9] I adopt Haslanger's (2016, 118–9; 2024, 49) notion of structural positions as nodes in a system. I come back to this notion in the last two sections.

[10] Sangiovanni (2018) criticizes Young's understanding of causality.

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When Young considers this latter issue—which actions to take to discharge responsibility—the fact that our actions sustain structural processes falls out of view. The agent whose actions sustain structures is replaced by the political actor, a member of the public, who engages with its similarly positioned peers in a public discourse of communication aimed at collective, public action.

It is unclear why this political actor would have the power to transform structures.[11] What is clear, however, is that this power does not come from agents' structural positions; it exists only when agents join with others, differently situated in the structure, in a public constituted by communication. Thus understood, transformative power is external to the structure. The implicit assumption is that although our actions cause structural processes, they cannot change those processes while framed by structures. They can only do so if they move into a different sphere, of a public constituted by communication, and become part of collective actions.

This leaves out, one could object, Young's "parameters of reasoning about responsibility" (142), where she argues that agents' positions modify their responsibilities (144). On that account, victims of injustice should lead collective actions against injustice because their interests are particularly affected and they have an epistemic advantage in understanding the injustice and effective remedies for it (113, 145–6). Similarly, the privileged have greater responsibilities because they benefit from it, most of them have more power to affect it, and the costs of acting are lower for them (145).

While differently positioned agents have different responsibilities on this account, these are still responsibilities to join collective, public action taken from outside structures. At issue here is not whether differently positioned agents have different responsibilities, but what sort of action they (are understood to) take when discharging their responsibility. Young's "parameters of reasoning" provide guidance to agents for thinking about what actions to take "in relation to collective action" (144). Young offers this account because responsibility involves the agents' discretion regarding actions to be taken (143). While the four parameters—power, privilege, interest, and collective ability—indicate that different agents receive different guidance based on, among others, their structural position, the guidance is about joining political public action with others who occupy different structural positions, action that uses powers independent of agents' structural positions. It is not guidance about how agents should use levers their structural positions confer to them. Thus understood, actions are not the actions of situated agents that use structural levers.

One of Young's examples can illustrate this crucial distinction. One parameter of reasoning is "collective ability"—agents' ability to draw on already existing organizations, such as church groups, unions, etc., to coordinate their activity to promote change. Student groups involved in anti-sweatshop activism in the late 1990s and early 2000s illustrate this parameter on Young's account. Student groups focused their activism on universities because universities have more power than individual consumers over processes that create sweatshops. The campaign used the existing organizational capacity of universities to raise awareness about issues of global labor justice among other members of the university community, on which it called to intervene in processes that create sweatshops. As a result, different universities joined to support the activities of the Fair Labor Association of the Worker Rights Consortium (147). Young reads this as an example of differently situated actors, using communication and persuasion, joining in a public, collective action.

On my reading, the student groups' power cannot be reduced to their abilities to communicate, coordinate, and persuade. An account of their power must include one about their position in larger structures and how they and their actions were interpreted by their publics. The fact that they were college students, seen as respectable and knowledgeable, contributed to their power, including their power of persuasion, by casting them as agents that deserve attention. No doubt, students made use of their relations within their university communities. However, these relations were embedded within larger structures—of divisions between, for example, Global South and Global North, elite and non-elite universities—and what enabled students to turn those relations into structural change was the use they made of the levers these structures conferred to them. Theirs are powers that depend on these levers, and thus on their position in these structures; these are structural powers.

Young's view of the action that can discharge responsibilities as political leaves out these sources of agentic power and an important reason for our responsibility for structural injustice: that, when acting from our position, we have a specific power to transform it. We have this power not because we can transcend our structural position—by escaping false consciousness or deformed desire, as Cudd (2006, 188) suggests, or by entering the sphere of a political public, as Young (2011, 112) does—but precisely because we cannot transcend it, can only act from it, and when acting from it, we can do what no other action can: to not conform to (some of) its demands while still inhabiting it and thus undermine structural reproduction.[12]

There are other accounts of agents' situated responsibilities, one can argue, that, unlike Young's, do not assume that action discharging responsibilities is public. For example, Cudd (2006) argues that the privileged and the oppressed have different duties, both based on the general duty to avoid doing harm. The privileged have a moral duty to resist oppression, from which they benefit. The oppressed, although among its victims,

[11] For a different critique of the neglect of power in Young's account of responsibility see Goodhart (2018, 217–20).

[12] In my previous work (Marin 2017, 46–50) I relied on similar claims but I justified them differently and put them to different argumentative purposes.

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have a duty to resist oppression because they contribute to its harm (195–201).

True, on Cudd's account, the privileged and the oppressed do not act together against injustice. Cudd refers to individual action for which individuals can be held morally blameworthy. Nevertheless, this action is cast as originating outside structures; it is not action that uses levers conferred by structural positions. The privileged are required to abandon their privilege (196) and the oppressed are required to abstain from actions reinforcing their position (200).

Rejecting Young's view that all participants in structural injustice share responsibility but are not blameworthy and Catherine Lu's (2017, 259) view that all contributing agents who do not discharge their responsibility are blameworthy, Alasia Nuti (2019, 184–93) argues that moral blame and political responsibility are differential. While all agents contribute to structural injustice, they do not contribute equally. Powerful agents, such as states, should be held *morally* responsible because they have an inherent capacity to influence structural processes (186–7), while ordinary individuals should not because their specific contribution is virtually nonexistent (188). Questions of *political* responsibility should be separated from socio-theoretical questions of how structures are sustained and reproduced over time. Political responsibility should be assigned based on structural position (189): the privileged bear responsibility for eradicating unjust structures because they receive unjust benefits (190–1); the disadvantaged have a responsibility of solidarity with those similarly situated (192).

One problem with Nuti's account of responsibility is that it is not connected to one of structural change; unless the privileged and the oppressed *can* change structures, they should not have responsibilities to do so. Nuti is wrong, then, to think that questions of political responsibility should be separated from questions of structural functioning; understanding structural functioning, which includes understanding which actions can undermine it, is necessary for understanding possibilities of structural change, especially the possibilities available to the disadvantaged, and therefore necessary for theorizing political responsibility.

While Nuti is right that the specific contribution of any individual is negligible, ordinary individuals—including the disadvantaged—have some power to effect structural change when acting jointly on levers that structures confer to them, as I argue below. Nuti's claim that political responsibility should be assigned based on structural position is not specific enough. As a claim about *the reason why* one has responsibilities, it is wrong; both the privileged and the disadvantaged can change structures and therefore bear some responsibility to do so and bear it for the same reason. Receiving benefits by itself does not make the privileged more able to effect change, as Nuti's own analysis of the constraints experienced by the privileged in the structure of gender (those identified as men) suggests (190–1). As a claim about *which actions* one should take, Nuti's claim is correct, but for a reason her analysis does not theorize: because which actions one should take depends on the specific levers structures confer to agents in virtue of their structural positions.

This suggests that a proper understanding of how agents' structural positions matter for their transformative power and consequently their responsibility requires a robust account of structures and their functioning. The last two sections offer such an account. In the next section, I discuss Shelby's view of obligations under conditions of structural racism to show that the absence of such an account obscures the transformative power of agents.[13]

SHELBY ON THE CIVIC OBLIGATIONS AND NATURAL DUTIES OF "THE GHETTO POOR"

Shelby (2016) may not seem an obvious interlocutor for me, as he does not engage the literature on the responsibility for structural injustice. Nevertheless, he speaks to the same issue—of what one can and can be required to do under conditions of injustice—when he casts the refusal to work of those he calls "the ghetto poor" as a form of resistance (194), when he theorizes "impure dissent" (252–73), or when he asks, "How does the injustice of racism change the obligations of its victims?" Moreover, his discussion of "the political ethics of the oppressed" and his understanding of racism as structural (2016, 22–9) cast the oppressed as agents who act from within unjust structures, agents constituted by their structural positions. Thus, Shelby departs from the tendency I diagnose and criticize here, which is to split the picture of the agent that bears responsibility for structural injustice from that of the agent acting within structures. For this reason, Shelby is not simply an appropriate but required interlocutor for me, as his view seems to avoid my criticism. Moreover, given Shelby's interest in replacing the "medical model" of solving social problems with a structural analysis, one would expect his account of the refusal to comply with unjust laws to be part of an account of structural transformation.[14] It is not, which is puzzling. This puzzle, I argue, can be explained by the absence of a robust theory of structural functioning. This absence, I show, becomes evident in two of his views: what I call "the asymmetry of civic obligations between the privileged and the oppressed" and his account of the natural duties of the oppressed.

[13] McKeown (2024) offers a sophisticated account of power relative to position but theorizes it fundamentally as "power-over"—the power of dominating social agents over subordinated agents (75–8)—that predates and explains agents' "power-to" act (78), which is why, on McKeown's account, agents with higher power-over have more power-to (75, 79, 80–2). In contrast, I theorize a form of "power-to" that, I argue in the next section, is a form of "power-with" and belongs to all agents. For "power-over," "power-to," and "power-with" see Allen (1999, 121–9).

[14] Hayward (2019) raises this concern when asking: "How can and should resistance promote structural change?" (532).

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The Asymmetry of Civic Obligations under Conditions of Injustice Signals the Absence of a Theory of Structural Functioning

Shelby's account of obligations is meant to reject the conservative view that "the ghetto poor" should stop blaming the government for their condition and take greater personal responsibility for their material conditions by developing a work ethic, taking legitimate jobs, and ending their involvement in crime (Shelby 2007, 126, 128; 2016).

In Shelby's Rawlsian framework, this conservative view is that "the ghetto poor" shirks their civic obligations, obligations of reciprocity in a system of cooperation that creates and distributes benefits and burdens to all participants. However, one owes civic obligations "*only if the scheme itself is just*" (Shelby 2016, 195, emphasis in original; Shelby 2007, 144). Given the racism of US society, "the ghetto poor" do not have an obligation to work or to respect the law. The injustice of the system makes it reasonable for them to engage in criminal activity (2007, 151, 152; 2016, 212–8). To do otherwise, to accept the authority of the law and submit themselves to the demands of work, would be to accept their subordinate position in an unjust system (2007, 150).

This is true, but about everyone's civic obligations, not only those of the most disadvantaged. Under conditions of gross injustice, everyone's civic obligations are invalidated. The benefits of social cooperation, received by the privileged, are not governed by the demands of reciprocity either. They are not legitimate benefits received via a fair system that can be justified to all, but illegitimate benefits received via an unfair system. In the absence of a just arrangement, the receipt of benefits does not create a duty to reciprocate because benefits are privileges, not fair benefits. The privileged fulfilling their obligations as defined by the system would support a system that extracts unfair benefits from those it puts in a subordinate position. There is no obligation to do so. There is a responsibility to change that system.

Shelby's claim that by accepting their obligations as defined by the system, the oppressed accept their subordinate position relies on a partial, implicit account of structural functioning. If refusing to conform to the structure's demands amounts to refusing one's subordinate position, then conforming action reproduces the structure (and one's subordinate position), and non-conforming action undermines structural reproduction.

However, the implicit view is not a full account of structural functioning. This is shown by the asymmetry between the civic obligations of the privileged and the oppressed. A full account would explain how structural benefits and disadvantages are related to each other, that structures cannot deliver fair benefits to one group while failing to deliver fair benefits to another, and that acting in conformity to "normal" rules by both the privileged and the oppressed supports the structure. Adopting such an account would force Shelby to abandon the asymmetry.

Shelby on Natural Duties Renders Structural Functioning Irrelevant for Normative Theorizing

Shelby's view of the natural duties of the oppressed also reveals the absence of a robust theory of structural functioning.

The injustice of the scheme of cooperation, Shelby argues, vitiates the reciprocity requirement and the civic obligations of the oppressed, but not their natural duties. They still have several such duties: to not be cruel, to not cause unnecessary suffering, to help the needy and vulnerable when it is not too risky or costly to oneself, and so forth. Chief among these duties is the duty of justice, which "requires each individual (1) to support and comply with just institutions, and (2) where just institutions do not exist, to help to bring them about." (2007, 152; 2016, 57). This duty provides one with "a strong moral reason to protest or resist unjust practices" (2007, 153–4).

As I argued, Shelby's argument shows that the injustice of the system invalidates everyone's civic obligations. Given that natural duties are not invalidated, it follows that everyone's responsibility to transform the system is based on the natural duty of justice (2016, 222).

There are three problems with relying on the natural duty model for understanding responsibilities to transform unjust structures. Together, they show that in adopting this view of natural duties, Shelby abandons any implicit account of structural functioning.

First, the natural duty model does not identify the agents that should engage in structural transformation. If responsibility for unjust structures is a natural duty of justice, it binds every human being, not only participants in the structure. French residents, just like US residents, ought to reform the racist US system.

Second, it does not identify which structural injustices particular agents are responsible for. All agents are responsible for all injustices.

Third, it does not sufficiently distinguish between different reasons agents have for acting against injustice. On the natural duty of justice account of responsibility, the injustice of the structure is the reason for responsibilities in very different situations. The reasons one ought to transform a system one is part of—that gives one illegitimate benefits or burdens and puts one in a relation of privilege or subordination—are the same reasons one has to transform unjust systems one does not participate in and the same reasons one has for establishing a just system where one does not exist. The reasons why white US residents—who have benefitted from the history of racial hierarchy—ought to transform the racist US system are the same as they would have had in the absence of that history, the same as non-US residents have to transform the racist US system, and the same as everyone has to establish just institutions where none exist. The existence of unjust structures in which an agent participates does not modify the reasons those agents have to act against injustice.

One can object that responsibilities for existing unjust structures being natural duties does not mean

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that participants and non-participants have the same duties. Participants have duties to compensate for benefits unjustly received and rights to be compensated for unjust burdens, and they may have special duties to establish just institutions because of their proximity to injustice. Natural duties are modified by the existence of unjust structures but remain the ground for responsibility: The *content* of the "ought" is modified, while its *ground* (or *reason*) remains the same: to advance justice.

However, in the case of actions taken from unjust structures, this is a distinction without a difference. Unlike the case of establishing just institutions where none exist, agents dismantling existing unjust structures work through the structural context of their actions. Their structural context puts different agents in different structural positions, which give them different powers to transform the structure.

Crucially, these powers modify the reasons: having different powers (abilities) to transform a structure gives agents different reasons. If an agent asks, "Why should I take action against this structural injustice?"—a question about reasons—the answer should be "because, given your structural position, your actions—when others similarly situated act in the same way—can transform the structure." On this account, the reasons for agents' responsibility consist in the transformative powers of actions taken from agents' structural positions. These reasons cannot be separated from the content of the normative demand. Agents have a responsibility to act in those ways available to them in virtue of their structural position, and they have it because they have the power to act in those ways. This reason references processes of structural functioning—the processes that explain how structures function, how they are maintained, and what makes structural change possible.

This analysis shows that, by relying on the natural duty model to understand responsibility for unjust structures, Shelby assumes the demands of justice are addressed to agents independently of their structural context, thus abandoning any implicit account of structural functioning.

Shelby's Account Obscures Agents' "Structural Power"—Their Ability to Transform Structures

Why does this absence matter? The problem with the absence of an account of structural functioning is that it obscures the power agents have to transform the structures they inhabit by acting from within them. Shelby' view of what "the ghetto poor" are and are not required to do highlights this problem.

Given the injustice of the system of cooperation, "the ghetto poor" are allowed to violate laws but are bound by natural duties. This makes violent crimes impermissible, while crimes against property, as well as prostitution, welfare fraud, tax evasion, and so forth, are permissible (Shelby 2016, 220). Moreover, ghetto residents should disobey the law only in order to *publicly express* their refusal to accept their position in the system, but not in order to *actually* increase their power, status, and wealth in the system. Enriching oneself signals a lack of sincerity in one's message of rebellion (2016, 271).

This shows how, by assigning natural duties to the victims of racism, Shelby's account undermines their power. For the demands of natural duties—to not be cruel, to not cause unnecessary suffering, etc.—can block precisely the actions that would increase their transformative power.[15] By drawing a distinction between publicly refusing to accept their position (allowed) and increasing their power in the system (not allowed), Shelby ignores how actions in the latter category can transform one's position (and thus be a form of refusing to accept one's position). In a capitalist society like the U.S., wealth creates social hierarchy. In this context, in which the "ghetto" is a place designed to consign Black Americans to a position of low status and power, solidifying racial hierarchy, when those designated as "the ghetto poor" become wealthy, they reverse that racial hierarchy. By going against the law *and at the same time* reversing racial hierarchy, agents that, on the "normal" functioning of the structure, are supposed to be disempowered do more than publicly expressing their refusal to accept their position. They materially transform their reality; they transform their position.

This form of power is inherent in one's position. Its sources are related to the fact that actions are constituted by agents' positions. It is produced, partly, through the transformation of the meaning of the "ghetto" into one that does not maintain racial hierarchy. Only those designated as "the ghetto poor" can effect this transformation, and they can only do so by taking actions enabled by their position: by becoming wealthy and continuing their association with the space of the "ghetto." What they do in the process is access resources available to them in virtue of their position—their physical and symbolic association with the "ghetto"—and use them contrary to the ways originally mandated—by refusing to obey the law and becoming wealthy. In this process, they both produce and exercise transformative power. Actions available to them in virtue of their position have transformative potential.

Crucially, some of these actions would be forbidden by the demands of natural duties. For example, the natural duty of justice requires ghetto residents to protest their position in the system, but any material benefits that law violations could bring them should not interfere with that message of protest. The demands of the natural duty of justice, if heeded, would block precisely those actions that could transform the system. They diminish the power of the oppressed to act on levers available to them in virtue of their position, their transformative power.

In the last section, I argue that a conception of responsibility for structural injustice should take this power into account. Responsibilities should be understood as

[15] Agents may have other reasons to avoid these actions. My objection is to assigning moral duties that block them.

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structural. This means, first, that responsibilities for structural injustice belong to agents as constituted by their structural positions and, second, that the reason they have these responsibilities is their structurally constituted power to transform structures. In the next section, I argue that the source of this power can be found in the processes through which actions acquire meaning in relation to agents' structural positions and offer an account of these processes.

SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND STRUCTURALLY CONSTITUTED ACTION

Action, unlike behavior, has social meaning (Weber 1978, 4). This section argues that processes that confer structural power to agents include processes through which actions acquire meaning, in particular processes through which actions acquire meaning from their agents' structural positions. Actions are the actions they are because they are taken by agents cast in particular molds, molds fashioned by the agents' structural positions. Agents are cast in those molds by their publics through processes of interpretation, processes that take place in the presence of others, who confer meaning to the agents' actions. I advance this argument by drawing on Sewell's (1992) and Haslanger's (2015; 2016; 2017a; 2017b; 2022; 2024) conceptions of structures and Arendt's (1958) conception of action.

Social Structures, Practices and Structural Positions

Social structures are networks of social relations created as a result of interactions between social practices—"interaction," indicating that structures cannot be reduced to the sum of their social practices.

Practices put people in relation to each other and put people in relation to things. The practice of a family constitutes the relation between parents and children, that between spouses, and so forth. The practice of eating dinner puts us in particular relation to material things. Social practices are systems constituted by positions or nodes ("parent of," "child of," "spouse of," etc.) occupied by particular individuals but distinct from these individuals (Haslanger 2016, 125, 119). These positions define social roles (Zheng 2018).

Structures too are systems constituted by positions, but *structural* positions that constitute structures are distinct from social roles that constitute practices.[16] As structures are the results of interactions between multiple social practices, structural positions are the results of these interactions and therefore not equivalent to social roles. Agents occupy structural positions (woman) while also playing different roles in different practices (mother, dean, neighbor).

[16] My previous work conflates social roles and structural positions (Marin 2017, 46–7).

The Duality of Structures

Structures are dual. They are constituted by cultural meaning (schemas) *and* resources (Sewell 1992). Resources are actual things that can be means of power in social interactions (9); they can be nonhuman—material objects—or human—things like physical strength, abilities, knowledge, or emotional commitments (10). Sewell uses "schemas" rather than "rules" to indicate that cultural meaning includes not only rules "at the deep structural level," but at every level. They include various conventions, rules of etiquette, principles of action, habits of speech, and gestures (7–8). Some of them are informal, often unconscious.

Structures have a *dual character*: they cannot be reduced to either resources or schemas. Contrary to both material determinism and idealism, structures cannot be reduced to either their material "body" or to their virtual existence in the space of meaning. Resources are actual things that, unlike schemas, exist in space and time. Schemas are virtual, existing only as cultural procedures. They "cannot be reduced to their existence in any particular practice" (8).[17] This makes them "transposable"—they can be used not only in the context in which they were originally learned or most conventionally applied, but also in new situations.

While distinct, resources and schemas imply and sustain each other over time (13).[18] Schemas imply resources and their distribution in the sense that what makes some things resources—what endows them with the ability to produce and reproduce inequalities of social power—cannot be reduced to their material form. It depends on the cultural schemas at work in the practices in which they are used. By themselves, material objects are not resources. Only when endowed with meaning do they become resources, means to social power. The same material object has different meanings in different structures; it enables agents who have it to take different actions. A bicycle is a means of transportation—enable an agent to move from A to B—only where there are smooth roads, knowledge of riding bikes, and practices of sharing that knowledge. In dense forests or marshy areas, the same object would not be (what we call) a bicycle. It would have different meanings, be embedded in different (if any) practices, and enable different actions. Knowledge is a resource (in our sense) only in practices that attach value to knowledge. The Hudson Bay blankets are not simply a means to keep people warm. Given in the

[17] I use "schemas," "cultural meaning," and sometime "structural meaning" interchangeably. I avoid "cultural technē" (Haslanger 2017a; 2017b; 2024) because schemas' virtual existence is central to my view of social change, while "cultural technē" connotes "skill," whose existence is actual.

[18] Hayward's (2013) account of the processes of race formation in the US in which "identity narratives," "institutions"and "material forms" constitute each other has many affinities with my account of structure.

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Kwakiutl potlach,[19] they are "means of demonstrating the power of the chief and, consequently, of acquiring prestige, marriage alliances, military power, and labor services" (Boas 1966; Sahlins 1989, cited in Sewell 1992, 12). Blankets are resources in virtue of the schemas of the potlatch (12).

Conversely, schemas are effects of distributions of resources. To have the powerful role assigned to them when we talk of them as structural, schemas must be sustained and reproduced over time in the actual space of resources. Otherwise, schemas would be abandoned or forgotten and lose their power. Their power is validated and maintained by the accumulation of resources their enactment is supposed to generate and by being read off, learned, or inferred from the body of resources. A factory is not simply a set of bricks, wood, and metal but an actualization of particular schemas, which it also teaches and validates. Its material features—the factory gate, the punching-in station—are actualizations of the rules of the capitalist labor contract, which are learned, inferred from, and sustained by the features of the factory (13).

Structural Reproduction and the Possibility of Structural Change

The duality of structures explains structural functioning. Structures survive over time only because schemas and resources mutually imply and sustain each other (13). The duality, with its mutually reinforcing relationship, explains both the strong tendency of the structures to reproduce themselves *and* how change is possible as part of the structure's normal functioning. Changes in schemas can result in changes in resources, and changes in resources can result in changes in schemas.

These changes are possible because structures are "multiple, contingent, and fractured" (16); their different parts can come into conflict with each other, and none encompass the whole society. Sewell identifies five features of structures that explain how structures can change through the structure's normal functioning: "The multiplicity of structures, the transposability of schemas, the unpredictability of resources accumulation, the polysemy of resources, and the intersection of structures" (16).

Structures are multiple because social practices interact to create many different structures, located at different levels of depth, and operate through a wide variety of resources (16), sometimes in harmony with each other, often by creating conflicting claims and empowerments. *Schemas are transposable* because they can be applied creatively and unpredictably in contexts other than those currently informed by them (17). As a result, *resource accumulation is unpredictable.* As schemas can be enacted in new contexts and in unpredictable ways, the effect of any enactments on resource distribution is unpredictable, which can lead to changes to schemas (18).

The *polysemy of resources* follows from the fact that resources embody cultural meanings, which are never unambiguous, can be interpreted in different ways, leading to different organizations of power and empowering different agents. The factory embodies the rules of the capitalist order. But it can also teach the social and collective character of production, as Marx argued, which can undermine the capitalist order (19). Finally, the *intersection of structures* means that structures intersect and overlap at the level of both schemas and resources. This makes it possible for a set of resources to be claimed and interpreted by different actors embedded in different structural complexes, which opens space for social change (19).

Taken together, these five features explain why structures are not automatically reproduced by the actions they empower. Structures are at risk of being modified in all the social encounters they shape, and through which they are reproduced. The everyday processes that maintain structures are fundamentally unpredictable and take place at multiple levels. This unpredictability and multiplicity, central to the processes of structural functioning, put structures at risk and make change from inside the structures a constant possibility (19).

This view of structural functioning, Sewell argues, implies that agency—agents' ability to act—is enabled and constituted by structures. I argue that it also implies that the social meaning of actions depends on structures; actions are structurally constituted.

Agency as Enabled and Constituted by Structures

For Sewell, agency is implicit in the agents' knowledge of schemas and control over resources. Knowledge of schemas involves the ability to apply schemas to new contexts in unpredictable ways. This ability enables agents to transform practices or acquire new resources, changing power relations. Agents' control over resources includes an ability to reinterpret them in terms of new schemas, which gives agents powers different than those the resources originally conferred to them. This makes agency intrinsic to the existence and functioning of structures (20); structures enable and constitute agency, which can transform structures.

Returning to my earlier example, "ghetto" residents have a measure of control over their place of residence; it is a resource for them. This gives them the power to change its meaning by reinterpreting it. For instance, by acquiring material wealth, they create a new association between this urban space and wealth, changing its meaning in a way that no longer functions, in James Baldwin's (1998) words, to set limits forever to one's ambition (293). By acquiring material wealth, residents of this space push against these limits and against the presumption that the outside world can set them. This is possible because the social world is not unitary and structural reproduction is not guaranteed. They rely on

[19] As described by Boas, the Kwakiutl potlach is a complex social practice in which Indigenous nations on the west coast of British Columbia create social relations and status through ceremonies of gift-giving (Boas 1966, 77–104). The Canadian government's ban (1884–1951) disrupted but did not eradicate the practice. See Davidson and Davidson (2018) for a recent account.

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their access to both the urban space of the "ghetto" and the material wealth acquired, often by illegal means, two resources not found in the same hands on the initial meaning of the "ghetto." By acquiring access to both, they transform the meaning of "ghetto" and its role in enacting racial hierarchy. They do so by relying on the meaning of wealth in the larger US society, where it is a sign of prestige, respectability, and power.

This process of reinterpretation is not a matter of taking different perspectives on the same things. As it is made up by action, which takes place in space and time, it necessarily involves resources— actual things in the world—the only elements of structures that exist in time and space. As different meanings are sustained by different distributions of resources, action can change structural meaning by changing the distribution of resources. By acquiring material wealth, "ghetto" residents change the distribution of this resource and, with it, the meaning of the "ghetto," as well as the meaning of material wealth, that sheds its connotations of individual benefit (that interferes with the sincerity of one's message of rebellion [Shelby 2016, 271]), and acquires connotations of its power, including the power to change racial hierarchy as currently enacted.

Action as Structurally and Publicly Constituted

Not only is agency enabled and constituted by structures, as Sewell argues, through the knowledge of competent members of society, which gives them control over their social world. Actions themselves are structurally constituted in the sense that their social meaning (Weber 1978, 4) depends on cultural schemas. The meaning conferred to the actions of the "ghetto" residents that acquire wealth depends on the meanings that wealth, the resource they acquire, has in the structure they inhabit. Wealth brings with it meanings of responsibility, entrepreneurship, and respectability. Education would come with different meanings.

Meaning, however, is ambiguous; it requires interpretation. It is also contested; competent social actors can disagree on appropriate meanings, especially on whether and how they can be extended to new cases; it requires determination. Agents do not fulfill these functions alone. They rely on their publics to do so.

Action, Arendt (1958) tells us, is not possible in isolation from others. To be able to act, one needs the "surrounding presence of others" (188), the "public realm," which comes into being "where people are *with* others and neither for nor against them—that is, in sheer human togetherness" (180) and consists of the already existing web of human relationships (184). For Seyla Benhabib (2003), Arendt "has disclosed *the deep structure of human action as interaction.*" "One can live in solitude, one can think in solitude, but we cannot be generous or miserly, courageous or cowardly, kind or hurtful without the presence of others" because actions can only be identified as generous, cowardly, or kind if we and others interpret them as such (111, emphasis in original). Identifying an action as the action it is requires identifying the doer, their intention, the quality of what they are doing, etc., and these can only be done narratively, through the stories we—agents and the surrounding others—tell. "Action is disclosure in speech." (112).

The public realm is plural (Arendt 1958, 175, 184) as "not one man, but men, inhabit the earth" (234), as the others whose presence is necessary for action have "innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions" (184). Because it takes place in this plural public, in a context of multiple, conflicting wills and intentions, actions have consequences beyond the intentions or control of agents (184, 234; Zerilli 2005, 18, 13–4). The public's plurality is also why action creates stories that reveal the agent—reveal *who*, not *what* one is—but are not under the control of the agent: "nobody is the author … of his own life story"(Arendt 1958, 184). We depend for our political identity on "the attention of others who will judge for themselves" (Bickford 1995, 315–7).[20]

Arendt does not speak of action inside structures, possibly because she associates the notion of structure with Marx, whom she interprets as quintessentially materialist (1958, 89n21, 183n8). Nevertheless, we can bring her conception of action within Sewell's conception of structures as dual. Doing so allows us to see how action from within structures can disrupt the reproduction of structures for reasons not theorized by Sewell.

As structural thinking teaches us, actions always take place within structures, already existing webs of cultural meanings embedded in actual things in the world. I have argued that actions acquire their meaning from these structures. Actions are "structurally constituted." But meaning does not attach itself to action; it requires interpretation by competent social actors. If we accept, with Arendt, that action takes place in a plural public, then we can see that this public confers meaning on action. Action is "publicly constituted." Actions acquire their meaning not from their agents in isolation from others but jointly with their publics. Actions acquire meaning in a process of interpretation in which agents depend on their public(s), the other participants in structures, to confer meaning to their actions. An agent may have a specific understanding of their action. But that understanding is not, in Arendt's (1958) language, sovereign (234; Zerilli 2005, 16–7, 12–3). Whether an action will become one sort of action or another—will acquire one meaning or another—is not something the agent has control over. It depends on how one's action is "taken up" by one's public. It depends on the interpretation one's public gives to it and on how the public inserts it into the webs of already existing cultural meanings embedded in actual things in the world. As publics are multiple and different publics

[20] I disagree with Honig's (1995) reading of Arendt-an action as agonistic or performative. While action brings something new in the world, Arendt (1958) also thinks that most action and speech is concerned with the world of objects that lies in-between people and out of which their interests rise (182), a world overlaid with the networks and contexts of human relationships, the implicit presuppositions, contexts and referential networks she calls "the 'web' of human relationships and that action inserts the new into this web" (183; Benhabib 2003, 112–3).

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may give different interpretations (Warner 2002, 55–6), this process takes place in a multitude of publics.

This analysis reveals a source of structural change not theorized by Sewell. Structural change is possible not only because the mutually sustaining webs of meanings and actual things are fractured, contingent, and multiple, but also because action is structurally and publicly constituted: action acquires social meaning in a public process of interpretation of structural meaning. Each action creates the possibility of reorganizing relations between different parts of the structure: creating conflict between parts that worked in harmony or creating harmony between conflicting parts. That possibility depends not only on agents, but also on their publics, who confer meaning to actions. Not only each action, but also its public can put structures at risk. As actions have multiple publics, each action opens multiple possibilities of transformative interpretations and of structural change. And, as meanings are conferred by publics, structural change is action in concert (Arendt 1958, 200, 244) between agents and their publics.

One of Sewell's sources of structural change is the transposability of schemas: schemas can be applied to new cases, or in unconventional ways. For Sewell (1992), this process is under the control of agents who, as competent members of society, have knowledge of cultural meanings, which includes the ability to use them in new ways (20). On my account, the transposability of schemas is rooted not simply in the capacity of agents to apply schemas to new cases, but *jointly* in that capacity *and* the receptivity of a public to new interpretations or associations, a public's willingness to confer new interpretations or make new associations. This explains why not every attempt at challenging the current organization of power is successful. Some attempts are interpreted as cultural mistakes or as violations of norms. What makes an attempt successful is the response of the public.

Another source of change for Sewell is the polysemy of resources: agents' control of resources implies their capacity to reinterpret resources in terms of new schemas (20). On my account, agents' control of resources is not enough for their capacity to reinterpret them. That capacity belongs jointly to agents and their publics, as publics are involved in the act of interpretation.

The process in which schemas and resources are interpreted—a source of change—involves not only agents but also their public(s). Actions are structurally and publicly constituted in virtue of this process: They acquire meaning by reference to cultural meanings that are part of structures, structures that need to be interpreted by a public.

Structural Power

I can now give an account of agents' power to transform structures as "structural power." Processes of structural reproduction make structural change possible because structures are the duality of mutually reinforcing schemas and resources, both of which must be continuously validated. This continuous validation depends on agents and their publics. Each action reinscribes the current associations between schemas and resources or begins new associations. Agents participate in this process through their access to schemas and resources, which gives them the power to change the structure.

This power is structural: It is constituted by structures, and it is attached to agents' structural positions for two reasons. First, because agents' access to schemas and resources is mediated by their structural positions; they have access to specific sets of schemas and resources in virtue of these positions. It is their structural positions, not their social roles,[21] that give them access to the particular combination of resources and schemas that the interaction between different practices puts in their hands, and it is in the frictions and conflicts between these sets of schemas and resources that the possibilities of change lie. Second, because, more often than not, their publics "read" them in light of their position, occupying a position means that the identity associated with it is assigned externally to those occupying it (Cudd 2006, 44; Nuti 2019, 56). These two reasons are related: agents' access to the schemas and resources attached to their positions is secure to the extent to which they are "read" as occupying those positions by their publics.

STRUCTURAL RESPONSIBILITY

Our conception of responsibility for unjust structures should take into account agents' structural power: their power to transform structures, which is attached to agents' structural positions. My claim is that agents have "structural responsibilities": responsibilities to act as occupants of their structural positions in nonconforming ways that can transform current hierarchies.

Like Haslanger (2016), I understand structural positions as nodes in a system. A structural position stands in particular relationships to other nodes in the system, and it is distinct from the individuals occupying it. Haslanger illustrates the notion of a system with the family; a family is a system that includes specific individuals in particular relations to each other ("parent of," "spouse of," "child of"); we can distinguish the specific individuals from their position in the structure (118–9).

Illustrating the notion of *structural* position with positions in the family—a social practice—invites confusion between structural positions and social roles (positions in social practices). Structural positions are distinct from social roles because structures are not equivalent to practices but result from the interaction between multiple practices (see discussion at the

[21] McKeown's (2024, 76) elides this distinction when analyzing power between social groups (my "structural positions") as similar to the power between occupants of social roles (such as teachers and students).

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beginning of the previous section). Structural positions then result from this interaction. In other words, the meaning of a structural position—and thus its relation to the other positions that constitute that structure—is the result of the interaction between different social practices. For instance, the meaning of "woman" in the structure of gender is the result of the interaction between the social roles women play in a multiplicity of practices (and the meanings of those social roles in that society).

Haslanger argues that a structural explanation should concern itself with structural positions and ignore the individuals that occupy them (2016, 119). I make a similar claim about normative claims of responsibility. When conceiving of responsibility for structural injustice, I argue, we should not concern ourselves with the specific individuals occupying these positions. Our picture of the agents addressed by normative demands should not be that of individuals who transcend structural constraints or even individuals who happen to occupy specific structural positions but whose ability for transformative action is independent of structures. Understood as calls for action, normative demands should instead be addressed to agents *as* occupiers of structural positions, agents whose ability for transformative action is constituted by their structural positions. On my account of structures, this means agents whose ability to transform structures is constituted by their access to resources and schemas available to them in virtue of the structural positions they occupy. As such, agents are addressed as a collectivity—the social group constituted by all the occupants of a position. Action is thus constituted as collective and political—as joint action in Arendt's sense—by the normative demand.

The argument for this claim starts from Haslanger's (2016) argument about structural explanation. If the actions of individuals occupying positions are best explained by the features of their positions rather than of the particular individuals occupying them, then the normative demands, as demands on action, should be addressed to agents as constituted by those features. However, if the structural features were exclusively constraints, this would not justify my claim about structural responsibilities. If structures solely constrained action, thus reproducing themselves, agents as occupants of structural positions would have no transformative power, which would make calls for structural transformation addressed to them pointless.

Hence, my argument needs a second premise, which is the claim I defended in the previous section: that agents have transformative power in virtue of their structural positions. Agents' transformative power is constituted by the structures they inhabit, specifically by their structural positions, for two interrelated reasons: They are "read" as occupying those positions, and those positions give them access to specific objects with particular meanings (resources) and specific schemas. Thus constituted, agents can reinterpret the meanings of the resources and schemas they have access to and apply them creatively to new contexts or new practices. Because agents' power to transform structures is constituted by their positions, normative demands should address them as occupants of these positions.

I illustrate this notion of responsibility with the example of the "wages for housework" (WfH) campaign (Federici 2012a; 2012b; Dalla Costa 1973). The campaign is centered on an understanding of housework as labor assigned to subjects relegated to the household and thus transformed into women by the demands of and functioning of (the structure of) capitalism. It provides an understanding of the structure it targets, its functioning through paid and unpaid labor, and of the structural positions—unpaid workers and paid workers—created to sustain its functioning.[22]

Three elements of this campaign are worth highlighting for my analysis: its structural analysis, the agents it addresses, and the non-conforming, disruptive action it calls for.

First, the campaign is informed by a structural analysis of the processes through which housework contributes to capital accumulation. On that analysis, there is a split, spatial and symbolic, between reproductive and productive work, split central to the processes of capital accumulation. Those processes have created the family and the housewife's role; they associate reproductive work with love, disassociate it from work, and create women—those relegated to reproductive work—as beings whose nature is housework (Federici 2012a, 16; Dalla Costa 1973, 19–20, 21–2). By splitting productive from reproductive work in this way, capitalism gets a lot of value for free and gets a lot of workers willing to work (Federici 2012a, 17). It gets almost for free reproductive work, the work creating labor power, that is, workers able to engage in productive activity for a wage every morning, as well as new generations of workers to sustain future capital accumulation. It also gets for free the emotional work required to heal the injuries to the self that result from working as a paid worker in the capitalist system (Federici 2012a, 17; 2012b, 23). The split creates "women"—beings willing to do this work—and their binary counterpart, "men"—waged workers. Finally, it disciplines male workers by giving each of them a servant (Federici 2012a, 17). The structural analysis creates what Katrina Forrester (2022) calls the ability of demands to "disclose social conditions," (1279),[23] including the existence of structural positions.

Second, the call of the campaign is addressed to agents as occupants of those structural positions, not

[22] This is not my endorsement of the WfH campaign as the best campaign politically. One can disagree with the campaign because, for example, one disagrees with its structural analysis or its claims about the effects of the demand for a wage on the structure. See Davis (1981) for such a disagreement. I do not take a position on those disagreements. I offer the WfH campaign as an illustration of what it means to say that responsibility is structural, that is, addressed to agents not as particular individuals that happen to occupy a position, but as constituted by that position.

[23] I disagree with Forrester (2022) that this disclosure is achieved by simply changing the names, or representations, of realities (1281–2). I cannot pursue this point here.

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as specific individuals or as a group constituted by shared characteristics or common consciousness. Instead, it is addressed to women—in their structural position as unpaid workers in the household—as created in a particular image and placed in a particular position by structural processes that maintain the capitalist system, an image related to their role in the processes of capitalist maintenance. Addressing agents in this way is to address them as a group and thus create a constituency (Forrester 2022, 1282). Crucial for my argument, agents are addressed as occupants of structural positions because it is in virtue of their position that they contribute to the processes of structural maintenance. As occupants of structural positions, they have access to the resources—activities, knowledge, skills, relations, etc.—attached to their positions. This access to resources puts in their hands the power of structural maintenance.

Third, the campaign calls for non-conforming action, for disrupting processes of structural maintenance. The agents' access to resources and knowledge of schemas in virtue of their position enables them to reinterpret them, for instance by treating housework as work. The call for a wage for housework is a call for treating housework as work and thus disrupting the processes that maintain the split between work and love. As housework contributes to processes of maintaining capitalism in virtue of being unpaid, calling for a wage —not actually getting it—will demystify housework (reveal its nature as work, not love), allow women to refuse to do it, thus disrupting processes of structural maintenance—both the processes that create women as unrecognized, unpaid workers and those that pull their labor into the mechanisms of capital accumulation (Federici 2012a, 15–6).

The three elements are related: The structural analysis reveals the structural positions, the relationships between them, and how they are produced by the same processes. It also reveals the resources and schemas available to agents in these positions (housework, the skills necessary for it, the meanings associated with the wage). Thus, it reveals the possibilities of action open to agents in these positions. This enables the call to be addressed to positioned agents—agents who, in virtue of their positions, have access to particular resources and schemas. This in turn makes possible the call for disruptive action: The call for a wage for housework is a call to treat housework as work, that is, to associate it with meanings of activities located in a separate sphere. This disrupts the processes that maintain the split between housework and waged work and, consequently, the processes of reproduction that create labor power, as well as the processes that provide capitalism with willing workers in the household and those that turn waged workers into willing masters and receivers of household workers' services. Asking for a wage for housework reveals to men the truth about their relations in the household, which might make them less willing to accept the coerced services of housework (Federici 2012a, 21). It reveals the divisions within the proletariat that capital has induced, thus opening a path for solidarity and liberation (21–2).

The transformative possibilities inherent in acting from inside agents' social positions have been theorized by Robin Zheng (2018) in her role-ideal model (RIM) of responsibility. One could rightly wonder whether "structural responsibility" is not simply another name for RIM. The rest of the paper argues that acting as "structural responsibility" demands contains transformative possibilities not available to agents that heed the demands of RIM, a crucial difference that can be traced to the difference between structural positions and social roles.

Zheng argues that individuals are responsible for structural injustice "through and in virtue of" their social roles (873). Drawing on traditional sociological theory (Dahrendorf 1968, cited in Zheng 2018), Zheng defines social roles as sets of expectations (predictive and normative) attached to particular relationships, such as that of student-teacher, parent-child, colleagues, and so forth. The expectations of each role spell out certain duties and are maintained through sanctions (873, 874). According to the RIM, individuals are responsible for structural injustice in virtue of performing their role, because social roles are "where structure meets agency" (869) for it is "through performing a social role than an individual (together with others) *enacts* structure" (874).

Social roles (and the actions taken in them) explain both how structures are maintained and how they can change. Fulfilling the expectations of one's social roles —explained by the interconnected processes of socialization and sanctions—maintains social structures (874). However, although role expectations are enforced by sanctions and maintained through socialization, they do not specify in full detail the actions agents can take in fulfilling their roles (874–5). When performing a role, agents must decide how to fulfill their role expectations, which allows them to do so in new, potentially transformative, ways. Therefore, in playing their roles, individuals can push against the boundaries of their social roles when they attempt to achieve something outside of them, thus altering the expectations of the role.

For example, as a professor, Zheng can request an audience with the dean and, in that audience, request that the university adopt a policy of using gender-neutral language (877). The professor uses the powers it has in virtue of their role *and* pushes the boundaries of their role. This is what makes structural transformation possible: "When all individuals throughout the entire system *push the boundaries of their social roles*" by acting from within their roles (877, emphasis in original). The professor's actions are intelligible and appropriate because they are taken from within the role as defined by a bundle of expectations about what a "professor" is. But they also push against the boundaries of the social role because they attempt "to achieve something outside of it": influencing the expectations that apply to others, which opens new options for action for these others (877). This is why

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individuals have responsibility for structural injustice in virtue of their social roles: because they can use the powers they have in virtue of their social roles to push against the boundaries of their social roles, change the expectations defining the social roles, and thus transform the system.

While there are parallels between RIM and "structural responsibility," I argue that RIM cannot explain *structural* change for two reasons. First, acting in the ways Zheng calls "pushing against the boundaries of a role" may change the expectations of the role, but only in the sense that it extends them; it does not result in abandoning old expectations; the agent is now expected to take actions not previously required by the role. The demand to "push against the boundaries of a role" is not a demand to act contrary to the expectations of that role; it is to fulfill the same role in new ways that enable one to do new things compatible with the role as previously defined; that can lead to a change in the expectations of other roles in the same practice. All along, however, one's actions remain "intelligible and "appropriate" for one as playing one's role (877). The professor's audience with the dean may create new expectations for professors and deans; it does not contribute to abandoning previous expectations.

In contrast, on my account, the demand is to act as an occupant of one's position, but not in ways mandated by the structure, not under the expectations for one's position; the demand is to act in non-conforming ways, ways inappropriate for the position as currently defined, which enables one to disrupt the position as currently defined. A woman not acting "like a woman" is sanctioned (or not recognized as a woman). But if most (or a large group of) women stop acting as women (are expected to), doubts arise about the position itself; doubts arise, that is, that the position functions as it is supposed to. At limit, if all women stop acting "as women," act in ways inappropriate for women, and do so across all practices, the position (as currently practiced) disappears. This mechanism of change presupposes that one acts from one's position, that one is "read" under the category for one's position. Otherwise, one's action would not count as inappropriate and could not disrupt the position. This is why "structural responsibility" requires acting as the occupant of one's position, but acting in non-conforming, inappropriate ways.

Second, Zheng makes a convincing case that acting according to RIM can change the expectations of the roles in a practice, even leading from change in one role-segment to change in another role-segment of a relationship (the professor acting in new ways changes not only expectations for professors, but also for deans). However, this change is localized; it is a change of a practice, not of the structure the practice is embedded in. Zheng seems to assume that the former will lead to the latter, but it is unclear why that would be so and what in the theory of social roles could explain that further change. For example, expectations for family members can change while the role of the family in the larger society remains the same.[24] In the last several decades, expectations for parents and spouses have arguably changed to become more gender neutral. However, this has not led to a change in the social function of the family, which continues to be understood as a private sphere, its members responsible for each other's care, and as the single place for intimacy and sexual pleasure (Berlant and Warner 1998). Gay marriage has, arguably, entrenched, not dislodged, these functions of the family (Warner 2000, 81–147).

Whatever the empirical case may be, the problem for the RIM is that it lacks the theoretical tools to explain how changes of role expectations, which are internal to a practice, can lead to structural changes. In fact, the theory has to accept the opposite: If social order depends on previous expectations, which, as I argued, are not endangered by actions under RIM, then actions mandated by RIM do not amend the mechanism that maintains social order. Rather, the change under RIM is a case of "the more things change the more they remain the same." It is crucial for RIM that current expectations be maintained because an agent's ability to push against the boundaries of their social role depends on the existence of that role, such that their new actions remain intelligible and appropriate for someone in that role (877).

In contrast, my account can explain how change can move beyond its location to the larger structure because it addresses agents as occupants of structural positions, not social roles, understands structural positions to result from the interaction between different social practices, and relies on Sewell's (1992) idea that schemas are virtual, i.e., "cannot be reduced to their existence in any particular practice," can be actualized in different ways (8).

As occupants of structural positions, agents have access to resources and cultural meanings through different practices—all the practices whose interaction constitutes their structural position. When acting, agents use their access to these resources and schemas. They can introduce change because they can interpret the cultural meanings of these resources in new ways ("ghetto" residents confer new meanings on their urban space – turn it into a place of power and respectability – by acquiring wealth; women treat their activities in the household as work rather than love by asking for a wage) or use their access to schemas to apply them in new ways, to different contexts or to different practices than the ones where they are conventionally used. By asking for a wage for housework, women, constituted as such by the capitalist system, use their knowledge of the cultural meanings of a wage but apply it to a context where it was not applied before. This sort of change is not localized. It affects the system because agents inhabit multiple practices, and schemas, being virtual, can "travel" between different practices and in the

[24] By "role" I mean "Cummins function," how a practice functions relative to the system (society), not "etiological function," the purpose it was designed for (Haslanger 2022, 515, 522–3).

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process can acquire new meanings. By treating housework as work and calling for a wage for housework, women change the meaning of work—it is not only productive but also reproductive activity. In the process, they point out that the wage is not only a means of freedom (as defenders of capitalism would think) and not even one of domination of the workers (as critics of capitalism would say), but also a means of coercion of those excluded from the wage. In the process, they reconstitute their structural position by connecting the position of the housewife to that of others coerced through the exclusion from the wage.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that our normative theories about responsibility for structural injustice should be informed by better social theories, theories that make sense of the agents' power to effect social change from inside structures. In the absence of such socio-theoretical accounts, our theories of responsibility are divorced from questions of social change. I offered a theory of structures, structural functioning, and the relation between structures and actions according to which actions are "structurally constituted" and "plurally public," features that explain the capacity of actions to transform the structures within which they are taken. This social-theoretical account is the basis of my argument that responsibility to dismantle unjust structures should be understood as "structural responsibility": responsibility to act from one's structural position in ways that can disrupt the mechanisms of structural maintenance. We have the power to do so because, as occupants of structural positions, we have access to resources associated with our positions, and our actions are interpreted through cultural meanings related to that position. Acting in non-conforming ways from our structural position, we can reinterpret these resources and cultural meanings and thus disrupt the processes of structural maintenance.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human participants.

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