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Structural Injustice in Contemporary Political Theory: An Introduction*

Uğur Bulgan** and Valentina Gentile***

Abstract

McKeown's book, *With Power Comes Responsibility: The Politics of Structural Injustice* (Bloomsbury 2024) revisits Iris Marion Young's theory of structural injustice, incorporating critical realism and adding a focus on power dynamics with the aim of clarifying the contours of political responsibility when systemic inequalities are at stake. In this introduction, we first reconsider Young's original idea of structural injustice in light of some important critiques raised in contemporary political theory literature. We then present key aspects of McKeown's reformulation of this idea.

We live in an unjust world. Some of these injustices result directly from the actions of agents. If one person is robbed on the street, or if many are harmed by a defective drug, or if a civilian population is disproportionately

* The idea of structural injustice has recently attracted renewed interest in contemporary political theory. For the purposes of this introduction, we thought it appropriate to draw on some of this debate to give readers a sense of where it stands. Maeve McKeown's *With Power Comes Responsibility: The Politics of Structural Injustice* (Bloomsbury 2024), the subject of this symposium, is an important contribution to this literature. We are grateful to Maeve McKeown and all the contributors to this symposium for their thoughtful reflections on this book. The two authors contributed equally to the writing of the introduction.

** ORCID: 0000-0002-5556-3869.

*** ORCID: 0000-0002-4080-3444.

targeted in a war, the perpetrator(s) of the injustice can be identified and possibly punished. In these cases, the very existence of an injustice is linked to one or more wrongdoers. Yet, consider the case of Jane.[1] Jane is a single mother of three children, who has just been fired from her job as a part-time store clerk. Having lost her job, Jane can no longer afford to rent the apartment where she used to live with her children and is forced to move to a more suburban area. Jane finally manages to find a small apartment in a public housing project. However, after a few weeks, there is an earthquake in the area. The public housing unit where Jane lives with her children is declared uninhabitable. Jane thus finds herself jobless and homeless, and the effects of an external event such as an earthquake have a disproportionate impact on her living conditions. Jane is clearly facing some form of injustice, and yet in this case it is difficult to make a connection between the injustice she is experiencing and one or more wrongdoers. This kind of injustice, as Iris Marion Young has famously argued, actually takes a structural form. For Young (2011), the injustice people like Jane face results from the aggregate actions of multiple agents within existing social structures.[2] The fact that injustice is structural does not, however, have any bearing on our interest in the concept of responsibility. Yet, what kind of responsibility? According to Young and in contrast with standard legal and moral models of responsibility, we should embrace a social connection account of responsibility. This model links existing structural forms of injustice to a forward-looking, prescriptive ideal of political responsibility. Recently, a great deal of academic work has emerged which focuses on the notion of structural injustice and the associated view of political responsibility. In this context, Maeve McKeown's *With Power Comes Responsibility: The Politics of Structural Injustice* (Bloomsbury 2024) not only offers a unique contribution to a deeper understanding of structural injustice but also helps to locate this concept and its theoretical implications within today's political theory.

[1] The case of Jane, elaborated in the following discussion, draws inspiration from Iris Marion Young's seminal Sandy's case, which has become the paradigmatic example of structural injustice. To bridge Young's foundational insights with contemporary critical perspectives on structural injustice, and especially Estlund's recent contribution (Estlund 2024), we have incorporated a natural disaster into the scenario.

[2] For Young's elaboration on structural injustice, social connection model and political responsibility *see also* Young, 1990; 2003; 2004; 2006a; 2006b.

I. Structural Injustice and its Critics

It is undeniable that the concept of structural injustice has a strong explanatory power. We could say that it somehow captures the *zeitgeist* of our societies. It is therefore no surprise that in recent years, an increasing number of political theorists have recovered this notion expanding its application to various cases, such as colonialism (Lu 2011; 2017; 2023; Ypi, 2017), gender inequality (Nuti 2019; Parekh 2011), and climate change (Godoy 2017). As is often the case with powerful concepts, however, such academic attention is not limited to that part of the literature which takes up and defends the original idea of structural injustice. Indeed, this literature has provided important insights for a critical reading of this approach to both injustice and responsibility. Andrea Sangiovanni, for example, has recently argued that moral responsibility should be attributed to individuals as long as these actions collectively produce or reproduce unjust structures, and concludes that the responsibility for structural injustice should be both backward and forward-looking (Sangiovanni 2018). It is again Young's distinction between backward and forward-looking responsibility that is at the core of Robert Goodin's and Christian Barry's recent contribution to this debate. While sympathizing with Young's general project, the two authors highlight that this distinction results motivationally ineffective as, in their own reasoning, why should people feel compelled to act with responsibility for the future, knowing that if they fail to fulfil it, they will be absolved of any subsequent guilt that looks to the past (Goodin & Barry 2021, 340)? They also point to an internal incoherence in this model, since the same reasons for not attributing backward-looking responsibility would also apply to forward-looking responsibility (*Ibid.*). More recently, David Estlund (2024) has critically examined the philosophical and moral underpinnings of structural injustice. He compares structural harms to natural disasters, questioning whether social structures inherently warrant grievance attitudes in the absence of wrongdoing. He concludes that while structural injustice remains an essential concept, its classification as "wrong" versus "bad" requires careful handling, especially with regard to attitudes of grievance, resentment and moral indignation in the absence of identifiable wrongdoers.

II. McKeown's contribution to the debate

McKeown's *With Power Comes Responsibility,* which is the basis of this symposium, is also important in light of these critiques as far as it offers a

comprehensive attempt to critically re-examine structural injustice, by confronting it with today's most pressing political challenges, while remaining committed to Young's original project. The book introduces two important amendments to the original theory: first, it is based on a critical realist ontology that aims to deepen the conceptual foundations of Young's original paradigm; and second, it introduces the idea of power as linked to political responsibility. In other words, it offers new ontological, analytical and normative tools for approaching structural injustice. As editors of this symposium, we would like to point out that this book is one of the most sophisticated, yet still critical, recent tributes to Young's project.

By situating the structural framework within Archer's (1995) critical realist approach, McKeown aims to overcome the weaknesses of Gidden's structuration theory (Giddens 1979; 1984) which, she claims, is ontologically inconsistent in its approach to the relationship between structure and agency. For her, critical realism explicitly separates structure and agency and allows for a more nuanced understanding of their interplay. McKeown uses this more nuanced approach to analyze how power operates within social structures, arguing that powerful agents have a greater capacity to influence and shape structures. Thus, for the author, a critical theory approach to structural injustice must incorporate a thorough analysis of power. After accurately dissecting five dimensions and three forms of power, she reveals how power dynamics contribute to the creation, maintenance and perpetuation of systemic inequalities. Descending the ladder of abstraction, she examines the power of multinational corporations in the global political economy, particularly in the garment industry.

McKeown's analysis of power helps to differentiate types of structural injustice by showing how different levels of power influence agents' actions. Such analysis moves beyond envisioning structural injustice as an unintended consequence of individual actions. Structural injustice is in fact "deliberate" when powerful agents deliberately perpetuate unjust structures in order to exploit disadvantaged groups for their own benefit (McKeown 2024, 44). It is also "avoidable" when powerful agents do not deliberately perpetrate the injustice but fail to remedy it, despite having the capacity to do so (McKeown 2024, 43). And, structural injustice is "pure" when injustice arises entirely from social processes with no single powerful agent being able to remedy it (McKeown 2024, 41). To understand how such an analysis of power should inform the idea of responsibility, it is important to refer to McKeown's (2024, 36) scheme for assigning different responsibilities to powerful agents and ordinary individuals. She critically examines conceptions of moral and political

responsibility and proposes a "political conception of political responsibility" (McKeown 2024, 143) that requires ordinary citizens to develop the capacity for political solidarity. She argues that ordinary citizens are not morally responsible for structural injustice, but that corporations bear moral responsibility for historical structural injustice (McKeown 2024, 201).

Each commentary included in this symposium brings a unique perspective that contributes to a deeper understanding of McKeown's arguments, highlighting the book's novel approach to structural injustice while critically engaging with it.

Vittorio Bufacchi praises McKeown's approach to structural injustice but stresses that the rich discussion of structural harm and violence within the Marxist tradition is overlooked. Bufacchi notes that McKeown's tripartite typology of structural injustice relies heavily on "the levels of intentionality of social actors vis-à-vis the structures in which they operate." However, he also believes that McKeown's account lacks an analysis of relevant concepts from the philosophy of action, such as intentionality and foreseeability. At the same time, he is concerned about McKeown's reliance on power, arguing that without deeper analysis, her typology may remove the structural nature of structural injustice. His final concern relates directly to McKeown's interpretation of power, suggesting the need to distinguish powerlessness from disempowerment.

Mara Marin underlines two major contributions of McKeown's book: first, it provides conceptual clarity by separating moral from political responsibility; second, it helps to identify levels of agents' responsibility based on their power. However, she also raises important criticisms. First, she is concerned about McKeown's reliance on powerful agents as the primary drivers of change. Indeed, structural change may require the harmonized influence of less powerful agents. She also suggests that McKeown's typology of structural injustice risks diminishing the importance of a structural lens by focusing on agent-specific accountability, potentially conflating structural and agentive forms of injustice. Marin concludes that while McKeown's framework may redefine understandings of structural injustice by emphasizing power, it also highlights the need for further exploration of how various forms of agency and structural positioning influence responsibility and justice.

Rossella De Bernardi's commentary explores McKeown's integration of power dynamics into Young's original paradigm. She agrees with McKeown that corporations have unique agency within structural systems, and hence special responsibilities. However, she questions the very idea of "deliberate" structural injustice. She wonders whether the labelling of certain injustices as

"structural" is still valid when intentional agents can cause or change them. Using examples like sweatshop labor and global poverty, De Bernardi discusses the consistency of assigning moral responsibility to powerful actors in structurally unjust contexts. She suggests that distinguishing between unjust harms and structural causation remains problematic, especially when corporations might be blamed for sustaining broad systemic injustices beyond direct harms.

David Owen's contribution focuses on political responsibility and political solidarity. He emphasizes the gap between the theoretical framework and how the examples are treated. Owen delves into two key areas in which he believes McKeown's examples reveal implicit but significant philosophical commitments: decision-making power in tackling injustice and the nature of solidarity. First, he argues that giving those most affected by structural injustice a central role in decision-making is not just about respecting the insights of victims but is a matter of justice. McKeown's discussion of the anti-sweatshop movement shows how the perspectives of sweatshop workers should shape activism to avoid harm, such as unwanted job losses from boycotts. Second, Owen examines McKeown's account of political solidarity while distinguishing between symmetrical (within a marginalized group) and asymmetrical forms (privileged individuals supporting marginalized groups). The example of the feminist movement shows a symmetrical, in-group solidarity whilst the collaboration between United Students Against Sweatshops and sweatshop workers demonstrates asymmetrical out-group solidarity. Owen argues that both types of solidarity are essential, especially given intersectional differences within groups. The symposium concludes with a rejoinder by Maeve McKeown.

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