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Towards a Unified Theory of Oppression

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Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Birkbeck College, University of London

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I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

ABSTRACT

There is a distinction between the core concept of oppression and various conceptions of it. Whilst there is a lot of work on the various conceptions of oppression, very little work has been done on the concept of oppression itself. Only Ann Cudd offers a unified criterion, but her criterion is problematic for the reason that IM Young identified: it is exclusionary. Philip Pettit's theory of domination is marshalled and converted into an account of oppression, which unites IM Young's *Five Faces of Oppression* and Sally Haslanger's two-pronged conception of oppression. Domination occurs when an agent has the capacity to arbitrarily interfere with another. But the most relevant type of group in cases of oppression does not have agency, so "agent" cannot just be replaced with "social group." I thus source the capacity for arbitrary interference from social group membership. A further contrast between Cudd's account and the republican notion of domination is that Cudd requires harm to occur, whereas, for Pettit, mere capacity for harm is sufficient. The group aspect of oppression allows the circumvention of this dilemma, for in saying that the capacity to arbitrarily interfere must be exercised, it does not follow that every agent in the privileged group exercises the capacity. In treating the ontological as conceptually distinct from the epistemic aspect of oppression, the question of how there can be a justified belief of oppression is considered. The pragmatist conception of truth and standpoint epistemology are drawn from to provide a framework for justifying oppression claims. Finally, the implications of this unified theory with regards to responsibility are explored before considering the possibilities for and complexities surrounding the project of overcoming oppression.

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Introduction

The aim of this dissertation is to construct a unified theory of oppression and to map out the implications of such an account. Giving a definition or criterion for oppression is necessarily exclusionary. That, indeed, is part of the point of a criterion — to distinguish something from other things. Many theorists interested in oppression resist exclusion and essentialism. Indeed, given the current proliferation of work on feminist and critical race theory, the concepts of exclusion and essentialism have developed a bad reputation.¹ Catherine Rottenberg is explicitly against explication or social kind conceptual essentialism² and says that “any attempt to define feminism once and for all or to police its borders results in violent exclusions.”³ So perhaps it is unsurprising that, as Iris Marion Young and Ann Cudd note, there exists no sustained theoretical or conceptual analysis of oppression.⁴

Giving a criterion necessarily involves limiting a concept. It involves excluding items and events to which we do not want the concept to apply. As Lina Papadaki notes, a term that is too inclusive is meaningless.⁵ As such, it is part of this project to exclude some instances or events from the label oppression. This, however, should not be construed as a failing. Not all inequalities, harms, wrongs, and injustices are oppressive.

Young actually thinks that the concept of oppression has no essence. This sits well with certain oppression theorists because many of them are

¹ In Mason, R. (2016). The Metaphysics of Social Kinds. *Philosophy Compass*, 11(12), pp.841-850, Rebecca Mason notes on p. 843 that “The doctrine of essentialism has something of a bad reputation in the recent metaphysical literature, especially with respect to social kinds like race and gender.”

² At least when it comes to the concept of feminism.

³ Rottenberg, C. (2018). *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 21.

⁴ See Cudd, A. (2006). *Analyzing Oppression*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. vii and Young, I. (2011). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 9.

⁵ Papadaki, L. (2010). What is Objectification?. *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 7(1), pp.16-36.

engaged in the project of overcoming social kind essentialism. But whilst I agree with the project of dismantling oppressive social constructions, whilst I am on board with the effort to reveal that there is no biological basis for race and gender, we must remind ourselves that the concept of oppression is a tool for advancing claims of equality and progressive political agendas, and that we should sharpen and hone it to serve worthwhile political ends. How do we reconcile the idea that human beings have equal intrinsic moral worth with the fact that social hierarchies are pervasive, and people are differentially valued? The concept of oppression is a tool for the advancement of substantive equality.

Lina Papadaki essentializes the concept of objectification because she sees the value or political utility of being able to articulate the distinctive wrongness of objectification, amidst other more permissive accounts. Against Martha Nussbaum's analysis that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with objectification,⁶ Papadaki argues that objectification is intrinsically bad. In a word, she essentializes the concept of objectification. Martin Muller (following Gayatri Spivak) also sees the value in "strategic essentialism" in his effort to construct and promote the idea of the Global East, which he deems necessary to correct the exclusionary division between the Global North and Global South.⁷

Even if Young is correct that the concept of oppression has no essence, we can, like Papadaki and Muller, strategically construct its essence for ameliorative political purposes. Sally Haslanger⁸ and Katherine Jenkins⁹ have recently defended the importance of ameliorative conceptual analysis, and these projects have provided analytic legitimation to philosophical projects

⁶ Nussbaum, M. (1995). Objectification. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 24(4), pp.249-291.

⁷ Müller, M. (2018). In Search of the Global East: Thinking between North and South. *Geopolitics*, pp.1-22.

⁸ Haslanger, S. (2012). Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?. In: H. Sally, ed., *Resisting Reality*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp.221-247.

⁹ Jenkins, K. (2016). Amelioration and Inclusion: Gender Identity and the Concept of Woman. *Ethics*, 126(2), pp.394-421.

that have been traditionally marginalized as continental. If it can be shown that the concept of oppression is amenable to explication, perhaps a greater number of analytic philosophers will take work on oppression more seriously.

It bears emphasizing, however, that it is not the aim of this dissertation to vindicate, once and for all, any particular conception of oppression. It is also not my aim to provide an argument for what is the most fundamental and most important form of oppression to address. The underlying causes of oppression – or what analytic philosophers call explanation – are also beyond the scope of this explicative project. The goal is to address the lacuna that exists in the academic literature of a sustained theoretical analysis of the concept. Though I do not intend to offer a particular causal story for why there is oppression, I want to provide a framework for the analysis of all the different types of oppression that exist and have existed.¹⁰ After revealing (or constructing) the essence of the concept of oppression, I shall show how it can be used to articulate the harms that oppressed people experience.

After reading this dissertation, I hope that those who are interested in oppression – especially those who are interested in fighting oppression – will have a richer understanding of what needs to be articulated and what causal relations and mechanisms require analysis, in justifying claims of oppression. The aim is to unite structural and agential accounts of oppression. The aim is to find a common denominator among Young’s *“Five Faces of Oppression.”*

Due to the unclarity surrounding the concept of oppression, there is a growing tendency in certain philosophical groups to claim that there could be known instances of oppression where there are no culpable agents. I aim to dispel this myth by drawing on the work of G.A. Cohen about what our commitment to political principles entail for our personal behavior. I shall agree with Martha Nussbaum that, insofar as Young and others are committed to the

¹⁰ I am not trying to define ‘oppression’ once and for all. Concepts evolve, and I cannot assume to know how the concept of oppression will function in the distant future.

view that oppression is an injustice and that people bear responsibility for the repair or abolition of unjust institutions and social practices, it follows that failures to fulfill such responsibilities are culpable moral failures.¹¹ Additionally, I want to show that this growing sentiment is counterproductive to the project of overcoming oppression, and that it is our responsibility, as moral and political philosophers, to develop conceptual tools that aid the pursuit of justice. As Charles Mills argues, political philosophy should be a tool and not an end in itself.¹²

Speaking of the pursuit of justice, there has been too much ink spilt on the theoretical pursuit of justice. John Rawls and his followers have made sure of that. As Robert Nozick puts it, “political philosophers now must either work within Rawls’ theory or explain why not.”¹³ But despite the undeniably important role that the concept of justice plays in our societies and our lives, Mills gets something right when he says that the Rawlsian conception of justice does not offer much practical guidance for dealing with injustice and political problems on the ground. Mills argues that the Rawlsian conception of justice “represents a goal located in a different conceptual space, on an alternate timeline to which we have no access.”¹⁴ So many political philosophers, under the influence of Rawls, have become trapped in the ivory tower of ideal theory, uninformed and unaffected by real-world political problems.¹⁵ Thus, some allege that the concept of justice, at least as it is articulated by Rawlsians, is “a concept of bourgeoisie ideology.”¹⁶ This is why Mills says that “ideal theory can only serve the interests of the privileged.”¹⁷ In

¹¹ See Martha Nussbaum’s Foreword in Young, I. (2013). *Responsibility for Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press.

¹² Yancy, G. and Mills, C. (2014). Lost in Rawlsland. *New York Times*. [online] Available at: <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/11/16/lost-in-rawlsland/> [Accessed 9 Jun. 2019].

¹³ Nozick, R. (2001). *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 183.

¹⁴ Mills, C. (2009). Rawls on Race/Race in Rawls. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 47(S1), pp.161-184.

¹⁵ Geuss, R. (2008). *Philosophy and Real Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.

¹⁶ Young, I. (2011). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 21.

¹⁷ Mills, C. (2005). “Ideal Theory” as Ideology. *Hypatia*, 20(3), pp.165-183.

contrast, the concept of oppression is “central to the discourse of contemporary emancipatory movements.”¹⁸

Rawls is wrong to claim that we must begin political philosophy with the concept of justice, that we cannot know what injustice is without first knowing what justice is.¹⁹ There can, for instance, be disagreement among feminists on the details of a gender-just society, but they can all agree that violence against women is wrong and unjust. We can and should start with “existing injustices,” whilst “leav[ing] open what counts as the primary site of justice... taking Iris Marion Young rather than Rawls”²⁰ as the starting point of political philosophy. This work on the concept of oppression aims to show how.

Chapter One, **A Marxist Theory of Oppression**, begins with the Marxist theory of oppression and Marx’s idea that the primary relationship between oppressor and oppressed is one of exploitation. His theory of exploitation is elaborated, then his account of alienation is discussed. Two ways of understanding economic oppression are considered. The first is the traditional Marxist analysis by which an individual’s oppressed status is determined by her or his relationship with the means of production. The second way invokes a rich versus poor continuum. The second half of Chapter One deals with Ann Cudd’s and Iris Marion Young’s objections, namely, reduction and exclusion, against the Marxist theory of oppression. It is suggested that the crux of the reduction complaint is exclusion, and four senses of exclusion are identified: ontological, theoretical, political and explanatory. It is argued that Marxists are guilty of theoretical and political exclusion, but not ontological and explanatory exclusion.

¹⁸ Young, I. (2011). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 9.

¹⁹ Rawls, J. (1993). The Law of Peoples. *Critical Inquiry*, 20(1), p. 60.

²⁰ McTernan, E. (2017). Microaggressions, Equality, and Social Practices. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 26(3), pp.261-281.

In Chapter Two, **Ann Cudd's Exclusionary Theory of Oppression**, we turn to Cudd, the only analytic philosopher to date who has explicitly taken on the task of coming up with a univocal account of oppression. There is a discussion of Cudd's necessary and sufficient conditions for oppression: the *harm* condition, the *social group* condition, the *privilege* condition, and the *coercion* condition. The social group condition — the requirement that there is a harmed social group whose identity exists independently of the harm suffered — is identified as unjustifiably exclusionary. More precisely, her social group condition does not allow her to include the poor and other instances that we intuitively consider as oppressive.

In Chapter Three, **Alternatives to a Univocal Conception**, we consider alternatives to a univocal account of oppression, focusing on Sally Haslanger's two-pronged conception and Iris Marion Young's *Five Faces of Oppression*. If the previous univocal account was rejected for being too exclusionary, it is argued that Haslanger's characterization goes too far the other way: it is too inclusive. We then turn to Young's *Five Faces of Oppression*, which may be grouped into two categories using Nancy Fraser's distinction between *injustices of distribution* and *injustices of recognition*. Falling under *injustices of distribution* are: exploitation, marginalization, and powerlessness. Under *injustices of recognition* are: cultural imperialism and violence. Although Young is adamant that there cannot be a single set of criteria to characterize the condition of oppressed groups, it is argued that one of her *Five Faces* — powerlessness — can be construed as describing a shared condition of all oppressed groups. Indeed, Young's resistance to the idea of a univocal conception arguably does not come from a genuine interest in explication, since she is generally averse to the type of political philosophy which focuses on conceptual clarification.

In Chapter Four, **Domination and Internalized Oppression**, the foundations for the project of constructing a univocal theory of oppression are laid. We turn to Philip Pettit's theory of republicanism and focus on his

conception of freedom as non-domination. Pettit argues that freedom as non-domination is analytically superior to the prevalent liberal conception of freedom as non-interference, and this view is explained and examined. The notion of “interference” is analyzed, in part by demonstrating how and why non-arbitrary interferences can be construed as *constitutive* of freedom itself. We then address a worry about an individualistic tendency latent in Pettit’s political theory, but show how, despite focusing on the freedom of individuals, Pettit still privileges the collective aspect of freedom. However, Pettit’s reliance on a subjective conception of interests is, it is argued, unacceptable. We turn to the literature on internalized oppression and adaptive preferences to demonstrate why Pettit’s subjective account ought to be replaced with a more objective one.

In Chapter Five, **From Domination to Oppression**, we proceed with the task of converting Pettit’s account of domination into a univocal concept of oppression. This chapter has three main sections. The first concerns the conversion of domination into oppression. On Pettit’s definition, domination involves two agents, where one has the capacity to arbitrarily interfere with another. Based on this, it is argued that oppression involves the existence of two social groups where Agent A, *qua* member of Group A, has the capacity to arbitrarily interfere with Agent B, *qua* member of Group B, and some agents in A exercise the capacity which meets a contextually-defined harm threshold. The second section is devoted to clarifying the components of this new formulation. It is claimed that an interference is arbitrary whenever it does not track the actual objective interests of the agent subjected to it. The question of who counts as an ‘oppressor’ and who counts as ‘oppressed’ is addressed. The third section compares the new concept and previously analyzed conceptions of oppression.

Chapter Six, **The Epistemology of Oppression**, asks: How we can know if there is oppression? It begins with the problem inherent in an objective conception of interests: the threat of cultural imperialism. In order to protect

our reliance on an objective conception from paternalistic coercion, *pragmatist standpoint epistemology* is introduced. Cheryl Misak's pragmatist conception of normative truth is adopted: truth is understood in relation to the beliefs arrived at when inquiry and deliberation are taken as far as possible. To this is added the requirement that, for something to count as knowledge of oppression, the relevant inquiry must be undertaken by agents in the correct standpoint. It is argued that the combination of the pragmatist conception of truth combined with the requirement that the belief emanates from the consciousness of the oppressed (or those liable to suffering arbitrary interferences) is sufficient to protect this unified theory from paternalistic abuse and cultural imperialism.

Chapter Seven, **Responsibility for Oppression**, has two parts. The first part is a discussion of Young's *Social Connection Model* and an extended analysis of her understanding of responsibility. In particular, her view that injustice can occur without culpability is found to be incoherent. The second part of the chapter is a discussion of responsibility, which introduces several distinctions: backward-looking and forward-looking, interactional and institutional, and acts and omissions. These distinctions work together to help articulate how to adjudicate responsibility for oppression. The question of the role of the state is also considered.

In Chapter Eight, **Thoughts on Overcoming Oppression**, we turn to the problem of overcoming oppression. Dale Jamieson's account of moral progress is analyzed, and it is pointed out that the narrative he proposes is told from the perspective of the privileged. It is argued that the oppressed have a duty to self-emancipate, and the problems concerning self-emancipation are explored. Lastly, two potential objections are addressed. Firstly, in requiring the oppressed to self-emancipate, do we run the risk of blaming the victim? Secondly, does this new concept of oppression foster divisiveness?

My hope is that this doctoral project provides a clearer picture of what oppression is, which can aid the effort to establish the fact that certain groups are oppressed. I shall engage with and attempt to improve on the accounts offered by other scholars of oppression to continue with the growing tradition of politically engaged philosophical scholarship. We shall begin with perhaps the most influential theory of oppression: Marxism.

CHAPTER ONE

A Marxist Theory of Oppression

1. Oppression in Marxism

Terry Eagleton describes a Marxist as “someone who is unable to get over his or her astonishment that most people who have lived and died have spent their lives in wretched, fruitless, unremitting toil.”²¹ Marxism is probably the longest running and most influential theory of oppression. It is a comprehensive critique of society, which focuses primarily on economic relations. It has been influential in shaping subsequent accounts of oppression. The Marxist framework and methodology of identifying two distinct antagonistic classes has been deployed by feminists, critical race theorists, LGBT activists, anti-disablists, and other social movements in their respective projects of articulating the wrongness and injustice of some social hierarchies.

In *Towards A Feminist Theory of the State*, Catherine MacKinnon favors a Marxist framework because it “confronts organized social dominance, analyzes it in dynamic rather than static terms, identifies social forces that systematically shape social imperatives, and seeks to explain social freedom both within and against history.”²² But Marxist theory, in its original formulation, is concerned primarily with economic class relations.

Karl Marx begins the first section of the *Communist Manifesto* with the statement “The history of all hitherto society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed.”²³ As this passage reveals,

²¹ Eagleton, T. (1991). *Ideology: An Introduction*. London and New York: Verso, p. 82.

²² MacKinnon, C. (1989). *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, p. ix.

²³ Marx, K. (1978). *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. In: R. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., pp.473-474.

Marx subscribed to an evolutionary and materialistic conception of society. As a materialist, he believed all reality is ultimately based on matter. The first task of the materialist is to identify the material foundation of society. For Marx, this was the economic base.

Marx sees society to be composed of an economic base and a superstructure. The economic base is the economic foundational structure that determines “the material conditions of life.”²⁴ Upon the economic base rests the superstructure. The superstructure “consists of legal, political, religious, and other non-economic institutions.”²⁵ Anything that is an institution and not material is part of the superstructure. The superstructure is like the skin on a human body, the economic base is the skeleton on which it hangs. The skin, like the superstructure, follows the contours of the skeleton.²⁶

As an evolutionary social scientist, Marx is a proponent of a teleological conception of society: society is viewed as evolving from one economic mode of production to another.²⁷ Human society is understood as beginning in primitive communism, where there was no concept of private ownership, where the males were hunters and females were gatherers.²⁸ It transitioned to slave society, where the notions of class and social hierarchy were born. People were divided into slaves and freemen. Slaves were considered property, and they were owned by their masters. Feudal society developed when the social elite owned land, and peasants toiled the lands for their landlords. Marx found himself writing in the capitalist era or stage of human societal evolution. Most of his theoretical analyses and writings are concerned with capitalism.

²⁴ Marx, K (1978). Marx on the History of His Opinions. In: R. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., p. 4.

²⁵ Cohen, G. (2001). *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 45.

²⁶ I am taking the analogy from a lecture on Marx by Jonathan Wolff.

²⁷ For a detailed discussion of how and why society evolves from one mode of production to the next, see Cohen, G. (2001). *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

²⁸ Marx, K. (1978). The German Ideology: Part 1. In: R. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., pp.146 - 200.

As Marx saw it, capitalist society divided people into exploiter and exploited, oppressor and oppressed. A person is an exploiter and oppressor if she is a member of the bourgeoisie, that is, if she owns the means of production. A person is exploited and oppressed if she is a member of the working class, that is, the only thing she has that has value in a capitalist society is her labor. Marx conceives of exploitation as a form of oppression; he offers a theory of exploitation, where the notions of surplus value and surplus labor explain the objective nature of economic oppression.²⁹ The worker and the capitalist enter an economic relationship. The worker sells her labor to the capitalist in exchange for a wage. The worker gets paid a £6.70 hourly wage and works 8 hours in a day, taking home £53.60, just enough for her and her family to survive. The worker produces products that the capitalist sells. The capitalist, after deducting the salary of the worker and the cost of production, makes a profit or what Marx calls surplus value. For Marx, it is labor that creates value, and so it is the worker that produced the value that the capitalist profits from. This is how the worker's objective condition is one of exploitation or objective economic oppression in traditional Marxist theory.

Another crucial idea within Marxist theory is alienation. According to Marx, what separates human beings from other animals is their capacity for labor.³⁰ As he writes in *Capital* Volume 1, "we pre-suppose labor in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality."

Alienation occurs when things that belong together become divorced from each other. Marx identified four ways in which the worker is alienated

²⁹ Marx, K. (1978). *Capital*, Volume 1. In: R. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. New York: Norton, pp. 294-438.

³⁰ Wolff, J. (2003). *Why Read Marx Today?*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 29

under capitalism. Firstly, the worker is alienated from her *product* because, amongst other things, she does not own it, as it is taken away from her after it is completed. Secondly, the worker is alienated from the production *process*. Instead of enabling the worker to realize her distinctive human capacity, production in capitalism is a punishing activity. This is most patent in the case of assembly line workers because of their performance of menial, repetitive, and highly specialized tasks. Thirdly, workers are alienated from *other people* because capitalism cultivates a culture of competition. Human beings become alienated from their communal nature. Lastly, workers are alienated from their *species-essence*, because labor, or the human being's distinctive capacity, is turned into a tormenting activity. In the words of Allen Wood, the capitalist system is alienating because "human beings cannot be masters, whether individually or collectively, of their own fate."³¹ The conjunction of Marx's theory of exploitation and account of alienation establish the oppression of the proletariat.

1.1. Contemporary Marxist Theory

G.A. Cohen identifies four features of what he calls "the communist impression of the working class."³² These are, firstly, that the working class constituted the majority of society (majority), secondly, that they produced the wealth of society (production), thirdly, that they were the exploited people in society (exploitation), and fourthly, that they were the needy people in society (need). According to Cohen, these four features once had "enough convergence among them for an impression of their coincidence to be sustainable." However, more recently, there is an "increasing lack of coincidence of the first four characteristics" in many Western societies. Cohen explicitly says that "there is now no group in advanced industrial society which

³¹ Wood, A. (2004). *Karl Marx (Arguments of the philosophers)*. Oxon: Routledge.

³² Cohen, G. (1995). *Self-ownership, Freedom, and Equality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 154.

unites the four characteristics.”³³

As such, the binary categorization of people into oppressed and oppressor by virtue solely of their relationship to the means of production may not adequately capture the condition of the economically oppressed, at least not in today’s developed, Western world. In Marx’s lifetime, after the European Industrial Revolution, having nothing to sell but your labor power was tantamount to being in an economically dire predicament. At the same time, in that historical context, ownership of capital and means of production was tantamount to being rich. As such, there once was general agreement among Marxists about the nature of economic oppression.

The same cannot be said now. Contemporary Marxism is heterogenous, and Marxism is not a theory confined within the walls of academia. Marxism continues to be the foundational framework of many social and revolutionary movements around the world. There are numerous competing ways to think about economic oppression, and no particular person or group of people have final authority on how contemporary Marxists understand what economic oppression is. However, for the purposes of this research, two interpretations of economic oppression will be particularly helpful, both drawn from Cohen. The first is the traditional Marxist notion of being a member of the proletariat or the working class. The second relates to a person’s level of material or financial deprivation. These are two distinct ways of understanding economic oppression.

1.1.1. Economic Oppression Due to Relationship to the Means of Production

In *The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom*, Cohen aims to defend a qualified version of Marx’s claim that the proletariat is forced to sell her labor.

³³ Cohen, G. (2000). *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 107.

In this interpretation, Cohen preserves the traditional Marxist view that economic oppression is determined by a person's relationship with the means of production (the instruments of production or raw materials).³⁴ Cohen investigates what it means to be forced to do something. He points out that whenever someone is forced to do something, it does not necessarily and literally mean that that person "had no other choice." What it really means is something like "I had no other choice worth considering." The point of this discussion is to show that the proletariat must work for a capitalist in order to avoid begging or starvation, and this is the sense in which the proletariat is forced to sell her labor power. William Clare Roberts restates this, saying that workers are "compelled under the pain of death... to accept an offer of employment from some master."³⁵

Even though the worker has a choice about which capitalist to sell her labor power to, the worker is always forced to sell her labor power to some capitalist. Given that the majority of the people in most capitalist societies are dependent on their jobs for their own and their family's sustenance, this conception of economic oppression has the political advantage of furnishing an extensive and inclusive economically oppressed class, which has valuable implications for overcoming oppression.

In fact, some may argue against this way of understanding economic oppression because it is too inclusive. Very wealthy CEOs of large multinational firms, for example, could be considered members of the working class and sellers of their labor power. Someone could argue that a CEO with a high salary and corresponding high expenses with little personal financial capital also has no immediate choice but to continue to sell her labor power. This might violate contemporary intuitions about what it means to be victim of economic oppression. Consequently, it becomes necessary to supplement

³⁴ Cohen, G. (2001). *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 32.

³⁵ Robert, W. (2018). *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 112.

this conception of the economically oppressed with an analysis of freedom.

The second important feature of this characterization of proletarian oppression is the distinction between “*collective* unfreedom and *group* unfreedom.”³⁶ Here, Cohen problematizes the claim that members of the proletariat can become members of the capitalist class with “effort, skill, and luck.”³⁷ Cohen says that he is concerned with collective unfreedom where the “relevant agents are individuals, not a group as such.”³⁸ He insists that “we are not discussing freedom and the lack of it which groups have *qua* groups, but which individuals have as members of groups.” Even though each individual may be free to leave her economic class, the proletariat is collectively unfree from escaping their economic class position. Cohen constructs a thought experiment to substantiate this claim:

“Ten people are placed in a room the only exit from which is a huge and heavy locked door. At various distances from each lies a single heavy key. Whoever picks up the key – and each is physically able, with varying degrees of effort, to do so – and takes it to the door will find, after considerable self-application, a way to open the door and leave the room. But if he does so he alone will be able to leave it. Photoelectric devices installed by a jailer ensure that it will open only just enough to permit one exit. Then it will close, and no one inside the room will be able to open it again. It follows that, whatever happens, at least nine people will remain in the room.”³⁹

This scenario is supposed to demonstrate how individual freedom can coexist with collective unfreedom. Although it is true that each person is free to leave the room, it is simultaneously true that the collective cannot escape. Similarly, “[t]hough each individual is free to leave [the working class], [s]he

³⁶ Cohen, G. (1983). The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 12(1), p. 17.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

suffers with the rest from what I shall call collective unfreedom.”⁴⁰ Slavoj Zizek seems to echo a similar sentiment when he says that “A manager in a company in crisis has the ‘freedom’ to fire worker A or B, but not the freedom to change the situation which imposes on him this choice.”⁴¹

1.1.1.2. What about wealthy individuals who satisfy the criterion of being a seller of their labor power?

Even if we allow that the working class suffers from collective unfreedom, this does not necessarily dissolve the problem raised above about wealthy individuals being counted as victims of economic oppression. The claim that very rich individuals are economically oppressed seems likely to violate contemporary intuitions about what economic oppression consists in. This is one reason why some consider traditional Marxist theory to be outdated. Determining the division between oppressor and oppressed exclusively in terms of one’s relationship to the means of production runs counter to contemporary intuitions of what it is to be a victim of economic oppression. Given that, as Marx predicted, technological advancements have allowed human laborers to be replaced by machines⁴² and the number of people who do non-manual work has increased in industrialized societies,⁴³ it may seem like the traditional Marxist narrative is losing traction. Even the Oxford English Dictionary does not define the working class simply as “the social group consisting of people who are employed for wages.”⁴⁴ They are, the OED states, usually engaged in “manual or industrial work.”

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 9.

⁴¹ Zizek, S. (2015). *Trouble in Paradise*. Milton Keynes: Penguin, p. 33.

⁴² Luk, G. (2018). Technology Has Already Taken Over 90% Of The Jobs Humans Used To Do. *Forbes*. [online] Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/quora/2018/01/18/technology-has-already-taken-over-90-of-the-jobs-humans-used-to-do/#123d57591bdd> [Accessed 18 Jun. 2019].

⁴³ Arnett, G. (2016). UK became more middle class than working class in 2000, data shows. *The Guardian*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2016/feb/26/uk-more-middle-class-than-working-class-2000-data> [Accessed 18 Jun. 2019].

⁴⁴ Working class. (n.d.) In *Oxforddictionaries.com*. Retrieved from https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/working_class on 9 April 2019.

For some thoroughgoing Marxists who accept Marx's account of exploitation and theory of alienation, the bullet is bitten – they concede that even wealthy individuals are members of the proletariat and are therefore economically oppressed – as long as they are dependent on their jobs and the capitalist class for their sustenance. As Cohen points out, “under some orthodox definitions of these terms, where, for example, the essential condition for inclusion in their denotation is that one must sell one's labor power to get one's living, the overwhelming mass of the population is, some would argue, now proletarian.”⁴⁵

Wealthy members of the proletariat are still exploited because the fruits of their labor are still appropriated by capitalists. They are still alienated because they are divorced from their species-essence. There is considerable evidence that suggests that financial success does not equate to fulfillment, and some even claim that CEOs are twice as likely than the average person to suffer from depression.⁴⁶ In any case, one could argue that even wealthy CEOs are subject to the arbitrary power of capitalists. Even well-off individuals are treated as means for the maximization of wealth accumulation. Even if it is to different degrees as their poorer counterparts, many CEOs and other wealthy members of the working class suffer exhaustion and burnout due to being overworked. This, Roberts claims, is “a phenomenon proper and essential to the capitalist world.”⁴⁷ Under a capitalist system, no worker is spared from the domination of alien market forces. To this day, certain academics and theoreticians remain persuaded by the original Marxian idea that capitalism, both its ideology and practices, have detrimental effects on people's psyches and wellbeing.

⁴⁵ Cohen, G. (2000). *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 108.

⁴⁶ Barnard, J. (2008). Narcissism, Over-Optimism, Fear, Anger, and Depression: The Interior Lives of Corporate Leaders. *College of William & Mary Law School William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository*. [online] Available at: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/73971113.pdf> [Accessed 18 Jun. 2019].

⁴⁷ Robert, W. (2018). *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p.131.

In any case, wealthy proletarians are still not the norm. In Britain, “45.8% of household heads are in the manual worker or lower-paid social grade bracket known as C2DE”⁴⁸ and “60% of Britons regard themselves as working class.”⁴⁹ In the UK, there is an increase in suicide among middle-aged men, and some experts have argued that such increase is strongly related to unemployment and precarious work.⁵⁰ The Bureau of Labor Statistics published a report on the top ten most common jobs in the United States of America. Nine out of ten of these are low-paying work.⁵¹ A Marxist could convincingly argue that the existence of very wealthy members of the working class are aberrations, and a theory does not get disproved just because there are exceptions. We can never perfectly fit reality into neat categories, but this is a limitation of every theory.

Outside of Western societies, the majority of the people in the Third World are poor.⁵² It is on these grounds that a country is classified as a member of the Third World. Cohen admits to being criticized for being blind to “the fact that a classically featured international proletariat has emerged or is emerging.”⁵³ But while he admits that “there are producers [in the Third World], previously cut off from capitalism, who amply realize the exploitation and need characteristics,” he is adamant that they do not constitute a “majority within

⁴⁸ Arnett, G. (2016). UK became more middle class than working class in 2000, data shows. *The Guardian*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2016/feb/26/uk-more-middle-class-than-working-class-2000-data> [Accessed 18 Jun. 2019].

⁴⁹ Butler, P. (2016). Most Britons regard themselves as working class, survey finds. *The Guardian* [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/jun/29/most-brits-regard-themselves-as-working-class-survey-finds> [Accessed 18 Jun. 2019].

⁵⁰ Nugent, H. (2012). Suicide on the rise among older men. *The Guardian*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/jul/15/suicide-rise-older-men> [Accessed 18 Jun. 2019].

⁵¹ Department of Labor United States of America (2019). *Occupational Employment and Wages — May 2018*. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

⁵² Although some may object to the use of the First, Second, and Third World distinction as obsolete, this is still the most defensible available categorization. The developed and developing distinction buys into the neo-liberal developmental paradigm. The Global North and Global South distinction is exclusionary to former Soviet countries who do not fit into either category.

⁵³ Cohen, G. (2000). *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 111.

or across the societies in question.”⁵⁴ He evinces some form of commitment to the neoliberal developmental paradigm when he says (in a footnote) that “they never will [constitute the majority] because, if and as their societies undergo further industrialization, then the dissociation of the characteristics which has characterized Western class structure will also occur in the East and the South: the majority of producers will no longer be both exploited and in severe need.”⁵⁵

Though Cohen is cognizant of the fact that most poor countries have remained “largely agrarian,” he seems unaware of how Marxist revolutionary movements in the Third World have, following Mao Zedong, adapted their conception of the economically oppressed class to include peasants or agricultural workers. In Africa, an overwhelming majority of the working population live below the poverty line and could be classified as agricultural workers.⁵⁶ In other words, they satisfy the criteria of majority, production, exploitation, and need characteristics that Cohen identifies. This makes the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist analysis relevant to their contexts.

In Afghanistan, where 62.19 % of the population work in agriculture and 42% of the total population live below the poverty line, the Communist (Maoist) Party of Afghanistan was able to unite various Marxist organizations in a concerted effort to install a communist regime. In India, where 42.74% of the population works in agriculture, the Communist Party of India is actively recruiting members and controlling some parts of the country.⁵⁷ 71.74% of the population in Nepal is engaged in agriculture, giving the Communist Party of Nepal solid grounding for their Marxist-Leninist-Maoist analysis. In these poor, agrarian countries, Maoist communist movements configure peasants and

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 111.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ In Congo, 81.93% of the population work in agriculture; in Chad, 87.19%; in Mauritania, 75.87%; in Madagascar, 74.41%; in Niger, 75.61%; in Zimbabwe, 68.46% -- to name a few. See Roser, M. (2019). *Employment in Agriculture*. [online] Our World in Data. Available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/employment-in-agriculture> [Accessed 19 Jun. 2019].

⁵⁷ Roser, M. (2019). *Employment in Agriculture*. [online] Our World in Data. Available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/employment-in-agriculture> [Accessed 19 Jun. 2019].

agricultural workers as part of the economically oppressed class. Contra Cohen, the economically oppressed class, including all agricultural, industrial, and service workers, can constitute the majority, whilst satisfying the need, production and exploitation requirements. It is arguable, then, that in countries where the basic structure of society can be described as semi-feudal and semi-colonial, at least one form of Marxism, namely, Maoism, is of utmost relevance.⁵⁸

Cohen's concern – that the four features required for revolution cannot converge – is thus only problematic for Marxists in advanced industrialized societies. When Cohen says that there is no “need to justify socialist transformation when people are driven to make it by the urgencies of their situation,”⁵⁹ what he really means, in traditional Marxist language, is that there are material conditions that compel people towards revolution. These material conditions still exist in poor countries, and the existence of Marxist revolutionary movements and guerilla insurgencies are a testament to this fact – even though their existence have been largely ignored by Marxists in industrialized societies. As Alpa Shah laments, thinking of the Communist Party in India, “the story of the world's longest-running revolutionary guerilla insurgency... remains largely outside of the global imagination; silenced from within its country of operation (except when it is to focus on the numbers dead) and silenced out of this renewed international interest in revolution.”⁶⁰

To sum up, there are at least two replies to the criticism that economic oppression can be determined via one's relationship to the means of production. Firstly, even wealthy sellers of their labor power suffer exploitation and alienation. Secondly, wealthy sellers of their labor power are not the norm, not even in developed and industrialized societies and most certainly not in

⁵⁸ Moufawad-Paul, J. (2016). *Continuity and Rupture: Philosophy in the Maoist Terrain*. Hants: Zero Books.

⁵⁹ Cohen, G. (1995). *Self-ownership, Freedom, and Equality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 156.

⁶⁰ Shah, A. (2017). Humaneness and Contradictions: India's Maoist-inspired Naxalites. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 52(21), p. 52.

poor countries. With regards to Cohen's concern – that there is a lack of convergence between the four features required for revolution – it has been pointed out that in many poor countries, there is still significant convergence of the four features, especially given that agricultural workers are included in the category of the oppressed working class.

1.1.2. Economic Oppression Due to Being Poor

Some may remain unconvinced that the foundational criterion for economic oppression is one's relationship to the means of production. Helpfully, there is another Marxist line which might be more accommodating of contemporary intuitions. Cohen offers a second interpretation of economic oppression in a paper entitled *Freedom and Money*. Cohen argues that poverty or being poor is tantamount to being unfree in capitalist societies. Cohen shifts the focus from the individual's relationship to the means of production to the way in which "money structures freedom."⁶¹ We could interpret Cohen's contemporary Marxist account as dividing people into rich and poor, instead of the original division based on their relationship to the means of production. Cohen argues against what he calls the right-wing position, which asserts that relief of poverty is not a primary responsibility of the state. Cohen summarizes the right-wing position as follows:

1. Freedom is compromised by (liability to) interference (by other people), but not by lack of means.
2. To lack money is to suffer not (liability to) interference, but lack of means.
3. Poverty (lack of money) does not carry with it lack of freedom.
4. The primary task of government is to protect freedom.
5. Relief of poverty is not part of the primary task of government.

⁶¹ Cohen, G. (2011). *Freedom and Money*. In: M. Otsuka, ed., *On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice, and Other Essays in Political Philosophy*, 1st ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 175.

Cohen mentions that others have tried to resist the conclusion by rejecting premise one or premise four. His goal, however, is to refute premise two by arguing that to lack money is to be prey to interference. He contends that money itself is what “confers freedom, rather than merely the ability to use it, even if freedom is equated with absence of interference.”⁶²

He explains this claim through an example of an able-bodied woman who is too poor to visit her sister in Glasgow. The woman has all the physical and mental abilities required to visit her sister, but if she boards a train with no ticket, and she is unable to pay the fare when demanded, she will be forcibly evicted from the train. She will, in other words, suffer a physical *interference* to her freedom, so goes Cohen’s argument. Suffering interferences due to a lack of economic resources is clearest when it comes to the global poor. Take the case of the *lumads*, people who belong to indigenous tribes in Southern Philippines. They live under constant threat of displacement as corporations and other resource extractive industries install mines in the areas where they live. The fact that the law does not recognize their claim to these lands means that they can be displaced any time. The same is true for the one billion slum dwellers in the world.⁶³ They must learn to live with the insecurity that their makeshift homes could be destroyed because a landowner wants to construct a mall in the area they occupy. The main point that Cohen makes in this article is that, “if you are poor, you are *pro tanto* less free than if you are rich.”⁶⁴

Cohen seems to be driving home an old point made in Marx’s unfinished *The Grundrisse* about the mystification of money. Money is treated as if it were a naturally occurring thing, like physical strength or mountains. Money, we must remember, is a social power in the form of a thing. Being poor means being unfree because money is that which enables a person to access things needed for sustenance, social goods, and to pursue her ends. Cohen

⁶² Ibid., p. 176.

⁶³ Praytor, S. (2017). How Many People Live in Slums Around the World?. *Borgen Magazine*. [online] Available at: <https://www.borgenmagazine.com/how-many-people-live-in-slums/> [Accessed 16 Sep. 2019].

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 177.

says that “there are lots of things that, because they are poor, poor people are not free to do, things that non-poor people are, by contrast, indeed free to do.”⁶⁵

This way of understanding economic oppression has the combined advantage of implicating the global poor as the most economically oppressed group whilst simultaneously excluding wealthy CEOs. It is also a much more durable criterion given the elasticity of the concept of poverty. It is also supportive of the idea that oppression is a continuum, allowing for the claim that the poorer one is, the more oppressed she is, which can be attractive to those who are wary of the absolutist binary categorization of people as exploiter and exploited in the traditional Marxist sense.

1.2. Problems with the Marxist Conception of Oppression

Ann Cudd and Iris Marion Young think that Marxist theory cannot provide a plausible theory of oppression. For Cudd, the Marxist theory of oppression is *reductive* in the sense that it reduces all forms of oppression into class oppression.⁶⁶ For Young, the Marxist “concept of exploitation is too narrow to encompass all forms of domination and oppression”⁶⁷ because it “leaves important phenomena of sexual and racial oppression unexplained.”⁶⁸ These two objections against Marxism, which we can respectively call *reductivism* and *exclusion*, may appear to be distinct, but a closer analysis reveals that the crux of the complaint is exclusion.⁶⁹ In other words, what is genuinely problematic about *reduction* is that it is *exclusionary*.

For Cudd, Marx’s “key insight was to see that economic oppression is

⁶⁵ Cohen, G. (2011). Freedom and Money. In: M. Otsuka, ed., *On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice, and Other Essays in Political Philosophy*, 1st ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁶⁶ Cudd, A. (2006). *Analyzing Oppression*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 26.

⁶⁷ Young, I. (2011). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 50.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁶⁹ Ann Cudd seems to suggest they are distinct.

crucial to oppression, but he tried to reduce all oppression to economic oppression as a consequence of his commitment to historical materialism.”⁷⁰ She criticizes Marxism for addressing only class issues, points out that “subsequent Marxists have attempted to argue that other forms of oppression, such as racial and gender oppression, are reducible to class oppression,”⁷¹ and contends that “these reductions are unpersuasive.”⁷² The charge that Marxism is reductive is not unique to Cudd. For example, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva alleges that Cohen reduces racial oppression to economic oppression.⁷³ Ashley Bohrer notes that some “Marxists reduce all social, political, cultural and economic antagonisms to class.”⁷⁴

The sociologist Stuart Hall describes Marxist economic reductionism as an approach that “reduces everything in a social formation to the economic level and conceptualizes all types of social relations as directly or immediately ‘corresponding’ to the economic.”⁷⁵ Similarly, Sarah Garnham criticizes reductionism for “over-simplifying complex phenomena, either by discounting contradictory elements of a totality or by collapsing them into other elements without accounting for their specific characteristics.”⁷⁶

Whenever philosophers use “reductive” pejoratively, what they usually mean is that it is *exclusionary*. In the philosophy of mind, for example, a successful reduction of the mental to the physical would be a theoretical success. The problem is that such reductions are generally unsuccessful and end up excluding important phenomena, such as (in this case) phenomenal

⁷⁰ Cudd, A. (2006). *Analyzing Oppression*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 121.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁷³ Leonardo, Z. (2007). *Critical Pedagogy and Race*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, p. 26, fn 13.

⁷⁴ Bohrer, A. (2019). Intersectionality and Marxism A Critical Historiography. *Historical Materialism*, [online] 2(26). Available at: <http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/articles/intersectionality-and-marxism> [Accessed 19 Jun. 2019].

⁷⁵ Hall, S. (1986). Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10(2), p. 10.

⁷⁶ Garnham, S. (2019). Against Reductionism: Marxism and oppression. *Marxist Left Review*, [online] (16). Available at: <https://marxistleftreview.org/articles/against-reductionism-marxism-and-oppression/> [Accessed 19 Jun. 2019].

experience or qualia. Reduction, when it works, renders something simple that otherwise seems complex – but it does so at the risk of oversimplifying and excluding important phenomena that fail to fit within the reductive theory. Cudd is against Marxism because it is *reductive*, but underlying this complaint is the thought that it is *exclusionary*.

Young could be construed as making a similar claim, but she has a wider target. Young classifies Marxist theory as part of the “distributive paradigm,” where justice is reduced to distribution. She argues that “what marks the distributive paradigm is a tendency to conceive social justice and distribution as coextensive concepts.”⁷⁷ She contends that “the scope of justice is wider than distributive issues”⁷⁸ and bemoans the overwhelming focus on material distribution or redistribution at the expense of non-material forms of oppression.

Having identified that the crux of the reductive objection is the problem of exclusion, we are in a better position to assess whether Marxism can furnish the tools to construct a univocal account of oppression. Before we can answer this question, however, it will help to identify four senses of exclusion. Firstly, exclusion can be *ontological* in the sense that there is a denial of the existence of non-economic forms of oppression. Secondly, exclusion can be *theoretical* in the sense of ignoring or failing to theorize about non-economic forms of oppression. Thirdly, exclusion can be *political* in the sense that there is a denial of the political weight or validity of non-material forms of oppression. Fourthly, exclusion can be *explanatory* when non-material forces are denied to have causal power in contexts of oppression. We shall analyze each sense of exclusion.

⁷⁷ Young, I. (2011). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 16.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

1.2.1. Does Marxism exclude non-economic forms of oppression by denying their existence?

It is clear that Marx and Friedrich Engels have some awareness of the oppression of women. In Marx's essay *On the Jewish Question*, he demonstrates concern for the plight of women under capitalism when he says that "even the species-relation itself, the relation between man and woman, becomes an object of commerce. Woman is bartered away."⁷⁹ In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, the young Marx likens marriage to a form of private property, where women within "the community of women"⁸⁰ are seen as commodities that can be privately owned if a man makes a particular woman his wife.

The most extensive and important Marxist work on the topic of women's oppression is not in fact written by Marx, but by Engels. In *The Origin of Family, Private Property, and State*, Engels attempts to give a historical and materialist explanation for the oppression of women. He argues that the primary reason that the family has a particular patriarchal structure is because of the need to maintain ownership of private property. There is, he writes, nothing natural about men being heads of families and that the traditional, monogamous family unit is a result of the rise of class society. More specifically, Engels argues that the origin of the patriarchal family "arose out of the concentration of considerable wealth in the hands of one person — and that a man — and out of the desire to bequeath this wealth to this man's children and to no one else's."⁸¹ For Engels, the patriarchal family came into existence because of economic forces, and, more specifically, because "of the

⁷⁹ Marx, K. (1978). On the Jewish Question. In: R. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., p. 51.

⁸⁰ Marx, K. (1978). Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. In: R. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., p. 82.

⁸¹ Engels, F. (1978). The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and State. In: R. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., p. 745.

victory of private property over original, naturally developed, common ownership.”⁸²

Engels considered the patriarchal family as a microcosm of class society, “a picture in miniature of the very antagonisms and contradictions”⁸³ to be found in wider society. Women are the oppressed, and men are the oppressors. He argues that “men seized the reins in the house also, the woman was degraded, enthralled, the slave of the man’s lust, a mere instrument for breeding children.” He considers marriage as the “crassest prostitution,” where the wife only “differs from the ordinary courtesan only in that she does not hire her body, like a wage-worker, on piecework, but sells it into slavery once and for all.”⁸⁴

Because the oppression of women is rooted in the traditional, monogamous family, which, in turn, is rooted in economic, material forces, the way to end women’s oppression is through the abolition of the very thing that it was designed to protect: private property. As Engels argues, “The predominance of the man in marriage is simply a consequence of his economic predominance and will vanish with it automatically.”⁸⁵ If private property is abolished, the material conditions that necessitate the persistence of the traditional family disappears. The basis for the oppression of women also disappears – or so Engels argued.

However, there are also Marxists who seem to come close to denying the reality of women’s oppression. For example, in his book *Class Struggle and Women’s Liberation*, Tony Cliff argues that feminists are “wrong” to identify rape, pornography, and violence against women as “the main ways in which women are oppressed.”⁸⁶ He seems to deny the existence of patriarchal

⁸² Ibid., p. 739.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 740.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 742.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 750.

⁸⁶ Cliff, T. (1987). *Class Struggle and Women's Liberation 1640 to the Present Day*. London: Bookmarks, p. 229.

social structures when he says that rape, pornography, and violence “are actions of individuals and are small compared to the way the capitalist system structures and perpetuates women’s oppression through its institutions.”⁸⁷

But Cliff’s main motivation for attacking some forms of feminism is because he wants to “show how women’s liberation depends on the class struggle.”⁸⁸ It is clear that he does not deny the existence of women’s oppression when he says that “Women’s oppression can only be understood in the context of the wider relations of class exploitation.”⁸⁹ Cliff grants that “bourgeois women are discriminated against vis-a-vis men of the same class,”⁹⁰ though he argues that “the divide between the two is nothing compared to the abyss which separates bourgeois women from working-class women.”⁹¹ He also clearly thinks that “the fundamental antagonism in society is that between classes, not sexes.” This could be interpreted as an acknowledgement that sex oppression exists. As such, it is difficult to justify the claim that Marxism is exclusionary in the *ontological* sense that it denies the existence of other forms of oppression.

1.2.2. Does Marxism exclude non-economic forms of oppression by failing to theorize them?

Susan Himmelweit notes that “neither Engels nor Marx anywhere define what they meant by men and women, presumably because they saw the distinction as obvious, biologically given and connected to the potential role of each sex in human reproduction.”⁹² In *Marx, Rawls, Cohen, and Feminism*,

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 229.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 228.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 228.

⁹² Himmelweit, S. (1991). Reproduction and the materialist conception of history: A feminist critique. In: T. Carver, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Marx*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 206.

Paula Casal states that “Cohen’s work on Marx was flawed by a lack of gender awareness.”⁹³

This is the heart of Young’s criticism against Marxism and the distributive paradigm more generally. Young thinks that “while distributive issues are crucial to a satisfactory conception of justice, it is a mistake to reduce social justice to distribution.”⁹⁴ Even if Marxists and distributive justice theorists do not outright deny the existence of other forms of oppression, they simply *de facto* exclude other forms of oppression by focusing entirely on distributive arrangements and by not problematizing gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, and other forms of oppression.

In Cohen’s *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence*, a work considered to be foundational for contemporary analytic Marxist theory, there is no notable discussion of gender or women’s issues other than in the footnotes. There is some analysis of racial oppression, but it is treated as a symptom of class exploitation.⁹⁵ It is also worth noting that in Cohen’s description of the superstructure (which is quoted in the early part of this chapter), he neglects to mention culture, gender, or race. Of course, he is not saying that gender, race, and culture are not part of the superstructure. Insofar as gender, culture, or race satisfies his requirement that they are “non-economic institutions,” then they are implicitly absorbed into the superstructure. However, such lack of explicit inclusion in the list is symptomatic of the Marxist tendency to ignore and therefore *de facto* theoretically exclude non-material forms of oppression in their analyses. Perhaps Cohen’s footnote can be construed as an accurate and honest admission of the inadequacies of a purely Marxist analysis. He

⁹³ Casal, P. (2015). Marx, Rawls, Cohen, and Feminism. *Hypatia*, 30(4), pp.811-828.

⁹⁴ Young, I. (2011). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 15.

⁹⁵ In Cohen, G. (2001). *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 349, footnote 1, Cohen says that “racial exploitation is (largely) relegation to an exploited class because of race.”

admits that “divisions of identity are as deep as those of class, and... cannot be explained in the usual Marxist way.”⁹⁶

1.2.3. Does Marxism exclude non-economic forms of oppression by denying the validity of forms of political activism that do not fundamentally challenge capitalism?

When Marxists characterize feminist activism as a “bourgeois” activity, they may not be outright denying that women are oppressed, but they may be saying that feminist politics should be abandoned. Rosa Luxemburg goes as far as to say that “the demand for women’s rights, as raised by bourgeois women, is pure ideology held by a few weak groups, without material roots, a phantom of the antagonism between man and woman, a fad.”⁹⁷ Luxemburg uses the notion of “ideology” to mean something that is illusory or a figment of the imagination.⁹⁸ In *Femininity as Alienation*, Ann Foreman alleges that “[Bolshevik] theoreticians saw the question of women as unimportant”⁹⁹ and observes how “the Russian bureaucracy had put women’s liberation as a matter for the agenda of the future communist society and not for the present socialist era.”¹⁰⁰

So, whilst Marxists may not exclude other forms of oppression on the *ontological* level, many have traditionally excluded them on a *political* level inasmuch as they have denied the political relevance of, for example, feminist activism that does not directly relate to private property relations or economics more generally. Whenever feminism is dismissed as bourgeois, the underlying thought is that feminist activism that fails to focus on the dismantling of private property relations is a diversion from real politics – class politics. As such, they

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 349.

⁹⁷ Luxemburg, R. (1973). *Rosa Luxemburg: Women's Suffrage and Class Struggle*. [online] Marxists.org. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/drapper/1976/women/4-luxemburg.html> [Accessed 19 Jun. 2019].

⁹⁸ Allen Wood identifies three sense of “ideology” on p. 120 of Wood, A. (2004). *Karl Marx (Arguments of the philosophers)*. Oxon: Routledge.

⁹⁹ Foreman, A. (1978). *Femininity as Alienation*. London: Pluto, p. 38.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 41.

aim to exclude some forms of feminism from the political table by claiming that it does not deserve our attention. The implication of this view leads to the exclusion that Susan Himmelweit is worried about or the “collapse [of] feminist politics into class politics and, in particular, to make the struggle against private property the central concern of both.”¹⁰¹

1.2.4. Does Marxism exclude non-economic forms of oppression by denying them an explanatory role?

Let us return to the claim presented by Cudd that Marxism ought to be rejected because of its commitment to historical materialism. It seems that what lies at the heart of the *exclusionary* complaint is the rejection of historical materialism or the view that material economic conditions exclusively determine the course of history. A commitment to historical materialism means that, ultimately, identity or ideology is mere epiphenomena. Returning to the philosophy of mind analogy, in the same way that some philosophers believe that “mental states are caused by physical events in the brain, but have no effects upon any physical events,”¹⁰² Marx and some Marxists believe that ideas and identities play no or little causal role in oppression. Orthodox Marxism, based on a strict doctrine of historical materialism, is exclusionary in this explanatory sense.

When we condemn Nazi Germany, we do not just condemn all the individuals and institutions that participated in their crimes. We also attach independent causal force to the Nazi ideology. We say that the Nazi commitment to the notion of the Aryan race played a crucial role in the mobilization of their political agenda. Marx, according to this objection, does

¹⁰¹ Himmelweit, S. (1991). Reproduction and the Materialist Conception of History: A Feminist Critique. In: T. Carver, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Marx*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 206.

¹⁰² Robinson, W. (2019). “Epiphenomenalism”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), Edward n. Zalta (ed.), Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=epiphenomenalism> [Accessed 19 Jun. 2019].

not have space for the causal role of ideas and identities in the construction of oppression.

But whilst it might be true – and, indeed, some textual evidence can be marshalled to support the claim that Marx thought that non-material forces are epiphenomena – plenty of contemporary Marxists have abandoned historical materialism and economic determinism. Antonio Gramsci,¹⁰³ Louis Althusser,¹⁰⁴ and G.A. Cohen (in his later works)¹⁰⁵ all reject economic determinism and historical materialism. Stuart Hall, a Marxist sociologist, explicitly states that he has “no hesitation in saying that [economic determinism] represents a gigantic crudification and simplification of Marx’s work.”¹⁰⁶

In an article entitled *Racism, Nationalism, and Race Theory*, published by the Workers Viewpoint Organization, the relationship between ideology and material base is analyzed. According to this piece, ideology “arises from certain material conditions and has relative independence from them.”¹⁰⁷ The authors argue that although racism was originally a consequence of the material conditions of slavery, “once arisen it also actively acted on the material base and facilitated its development.”¹⁰⁸ Even if we return to the original Marxist account of base and superstructure, Marx and Marxists do not deny that the superstructure or elements within the superstructure have causal force in contexts of oppression. This shows that some Marxists do not believe that ideas or non-material forces are causally inert in the construction of oppression.

¹⁰³ Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers.

¹⁰⁴ Althusser, L. (2005). *For Marx*. London: Verso.

¹⁰⁵ Cohen, G. (2009). *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

¹⁰⁶ Hall, S. (1986). Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10(2), p. 10.

¹⁰⁷ Workers Viewpoint Organization (n.d.). *Racism, Nationalism, and Race Theory: Relations Between Material Base and Ideology*. [online] Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-8/wvo-race-theory.htm> [Accessed 19 Jun. 2019].

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

Perhaps the strongest evidence that Marxists recognize the power of non-material forces is found outside the academic realm. During the Cuban revolution, for example, revolutionaries would say “You cannot kill ideas” as members of the Batista Army shot insurgents.¹⁰⁹ As such, although it might be true that earlier forms of Orthodox Marxism could be accused of being exclusionary in this explanatory sense, Cudd is too quick to dismiss Marxism as reductive when many later Marxists have worked to (re)interpret Marx in a way that is not shackled by or beholden to historical materialism.

1.2.5. The Most Relevant Sense of “Exclusion”

At this point, it is necessary to further clarify the aim of this research project. We have identified four possible senses of “exclusion” and concluded that Marxist theory is *exclusionary* only in the *theoretical* and *political* but not the *ontological* and *explanatory* senses. But whilst these criticisms against Marxism are important, they are not ruinous. Although there are at least two senses of *exclusionary*, *theoretical* and *political*, in which Cudd and Young could be justified in claiming that Marxism is *exclusionary*, these exclusions are arguably not beyond repair. To the extent that Marxists theorize on race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other forms of oppression, they are repairing the *exclusionary* theoretical practices of their predecessors. Insofar as Marxist activists include, for example, issues of gender, race, and sexual orientation in their agendas for social change, they are widening the scope of the Marxist framework. Insofar as Marxists are committed egalitarians, they have the ability to incorporate and condemn all forms of hierarchies, including status hierarchies.

We can make a distinction between the “core concept of [oppression] and various conceptions of [oppression] reflecting different moral

¹⁰⁹ Castro, F. (2007). Ideas cannot be killed. *The Guardian*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/may/30/ideascannotbekilled> [Accessed 19 Jun. 2019].

perspectives.”¹¹⁰ When Young and Cudd claim that Marxism is *exclusionary*, they are failing to make a distinction between conceptual clarification and causal explanation. Marxists offer a causal explanation for why there is oppression, and they are propagating a particular conception of oppression – economic oppression. The same is true for any user of the concept of oppression because oppression, like justice and desert, are essentially evaluative concepts.¹¹¹ What this means is that one cannot make a claim of oppression without making a normative claim.

But the goal of this dissertation is not to vindicate any particular conception of oppression¹¹² or to provide a causal narrative that explains oppression’s presence. The aim, rather, is to discover or, if you like, to construct the core or the essence of the concept. In engaging in this kind of explicative project of meta-theoretical analysis, it is unavoidable that my own moral and political views will seep in; however, the concept of oppression that will be defended here satisfies Ian Carter’s requirement for value-neutrality.¹¹³ The account I offer is, of course, contestable, so I shall use “concept” and “conception” interchangeably when referring to the unified account being defended, though my explicit project targets the core concept of oppression. As such, the most relevant form of exclusion to this project is *ontological* exclusion. Because Marxists are not denying the *existence* of non-material forms of oppression and because later Marxists tend to reject economic determinism, Young’s and Cudd’s objections appear, on at least one level, to miss the point.

¹¹⁰ Oppenheim, F. (1995). Social Freedom and its Parameters. *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 7(4), p. 403.

¹¹¹ Carter, I. (2015). Value-freeness and Value-neutrality in the Analysis of Political Concepts. In: S. Wall, P. Vallentyne and D. Sobel, ed., *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy, Volume 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹¹² Where ‘conception’ is understood as economic oppression, gender-based oppression, race-based oppression, etc.

¹¹³ According to Carter, a concept is value-neutral when “its use does not imply the superiority of any of a range of divergent ethical positions.” See Carter, I. (2015). Value-freeness and Value-neutrality in the Analysis of Political Concepts. In: S. Wall, P. Vallentyne and D. Sobel, ed., *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy, Volume 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Young is right to note that “there exists no sustained theoretical analysis of the concept of oppression,”¹¹⁴ but her commitment to the view that the concept of oppression has no essence causes her to neglect the related distinction between explication and causal explanation. It is possible to reject or be indifferent to the Marxist causal account for why oppression exists, whilst retaining the Marxian model of class analysis and its corresponding account of antagonistic interests. As such, since the Marxist conception of oppression is not *ontologically exclusionary* and the aim of this project is conceptual clarification (or construction), we can set aside Cudd’s and Young’s concerns about the unsuitability of the Marxist framework for the analysis of the concept of oppression. We can distill the Marxist conception of oppression of its materialist focus and use the method of identifying hierarchical, antagonistic social classes as a guide in the quest for a univocal theory of oppression.

1.3. Summary of A Marxist Theory of Oppression

This chapter began with a discussion of Marx’s theory of economic oppression. Although contemporary Marxism is heterogenous, there are at least two ways in which contemporary Marxists could be said to understand economic oppression. The first is the traditional Marxist sense that identifies a person’s class status with reference to her relationship with the means of production. This account is susceptible to the objection that very wealthy individuals could still count as sellers of their labor power. It is argued that very wealthy members of the working class remain exceptions. But for those who are unsatisfied with this account, a second is on offer: we may understand economic oppression in relation to material deprivation – a view that can be substantiated by Cohen’s later work.

The criticisms of Cudd and Young against the Marxist theory of oppression have been analyzed in the second half of this chapter. Cudd and

¹¹⁴ Young, I. (2011). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 9.

Young both argue that Marxism is *reductive* and *exclusionary*. It is argued that exclusion lies at the heart of the reductive complaint, and four senses of *exclusionary* are identified: *ontological*, *theoretical*, *political*, and *explanatory*. It is argued that Marxism is not ontologically *exclusionary* because Marxists do not deny the existence of other non-material forms of oppression. However, there is textual evidence to support the claim that Marxism is theoretically and politically *exclusionary*. In discussing whether Marxism is explanatorily *exclusionary*, it is acknowledged that there is some justification for the view that Marxists' commitment to historical materialism and economic determinism makes non-material forces causally inert in the construction of oppression. Ultimately, however, it is pointed out that there are many Marxists who reject historical materialism and explicitly recognize the powerful causal role of ideology and ideas more generally in contexts of oppression.

Finally, it is highlighted that, for the purposes of this research, the most relevant sense of exclusion is ontological. Young and Cudd fail to make a distinction between the concept of oppression and the Marxist conception of oppression, or the distinction between conceptual clarification (explication) and causal analysis (explanation). Given that the explicit aim of this research project is to reveal or construct the essence of oppression, we can put aside Young's and Cudd's worries that Marxism is reductive and *exclusionary*. Of course, there are other ways in which exclusion could occur. In the next chapter, we shall analyze Ann Cudd's theory of oppression, which suffers from a different kind of exclusion to the ones identified above.

CHAPTER TWO

Ann Cudd's Exclusionary Univocal Concept of Oppression

2. Exclusion Without Reduction

One way in which a univocal concept of oppression can exclude some forms of oppression is by specifying necessary and sufficient conditions, where at least one of the conditions functions as an exclusionary mechanism. Although Young's work on oppression is deemed authoritative in contemporary political philosophy and despite knowing Young's concern that a definition will suffer from the problem of exclusion,¹¹⁵ Ann Cudd has endeavored to devise perhaps the only univocal characterization of oppression in analytic contemporary political philosophy.¹¹⁶ Cudd's book, *Analyzing Oppression*, is supposed to be the only "book-length comprehensive, general analyses of oppression by [an] analytic philosopher."¹¹⁷ In this chapter, we will discuss its faults – but we must first try to understand her univocal theory of oppression.

¹¹⁵ On pp. 25-26 of *Analyzing Oppression*, Cudd notes that "Iris Marion Young has argued that 'oppression' cannot be seen as a single, unified phenomenon because attempting to do so inevitably leads to either a reduction of all cases of oppression to a single kind of oppression (e.g., the Marxist reduction of oppression of women to class oppression) or exclusion of some cases that ought to be termed oppression."

¹¹⁶ In Frye, M. (1983). *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, Frye defines "oppression [as] a system of interrelated barriers and forces which reduce, immobilize and mold people who belong to a certain group, and effect their subordination to another group (individually to individuals of the other group, and as a group, to that group). Such a system could not exist were not the groups, the categories of persons, well defined. Logically, it presupposes that there are two distinct categories. Practically, they must be not only distinct but relatively easily identifiable; the barriers and forces could not be suitably located and applied if there were often much doubt as to which individuals were to be contained and reduced, which were to dominate." Although this could be considered as a univocal description, and, indeed, it has a lot of similarities with Cudd's account, Frye does not explicitly state that her project is to define oppression. A closer analysis of her work reveals that her target concept is 'woman' and not 'oppression'.

¹¹⁷ Cudd, A. (2006). *Analyzing Oppression*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, see preface.

2.1. Ann Cudd's Univocal Concept of Oppression

Cudd confronts Young's worries head-on. She wants to "maintain that there are irreducible forms of oppression... and to provide a criteria that pick out all and only the oppressed groups."¹¹⁸ She describes oppression as "the fundamental injustice of social institutions."¹¹⁹ As a social injustice, "it is perpetrated through social institutions, practices, and norms on social groups by social groups." In an attempt to falsify Young's statement about the impossibility of a univocal conception of oppression, Cudd offers four necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for oppression. Her conditions are:

1. *The harm condition. There is a harm that comes out of an institutional practice.*
2. *The social group condition. The harm is perpetrated through a social institution or practice on a social group whose identity exists apart from the oppressive harm in 1.*
3. *The privilege condition. There is another group that benefits from the institutional practice in 1.*
4. *The coercion condition. There is unjustified coercion or force that brings about the harm.*¹²⁰

These four conditions could be grouped into two pairs. The harm and coercion condition work hand in hand to capture the injustice and wrong of oppression, whilst the social group and privileged group condition together capture the collective aspect of oppression.

Let us begin with the first pair, the *harm condition* and *coercion condition*. Unfortunately, Cudd does not give an explicit definition of "harm" anywhere in *Analyzing Oppression*. What we do know is that Cudd has an *institutional conception of harm* because she states that the harm must be a

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 26.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 20.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

result of an “institutional practice.” As such, her conception of harm is not easily understandable and may even countervail our commonsensical understanding of harm. As Leif Wenar notes, “the natural home for the concept of harm is what [we] would call an interactional setting, not an institutional one.”¹²¹

To understand what *institutional harm* means, we must first define what an institution is. According to the sociologist Jonathan Turner, an institution is “a complex of positions, roles, norms and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organizing relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to fundamental problems in producing life-sustaining resources, in reproducing individuals, and in sustaining viable societal structures within a given environment.”¹²² Institutions are like systems and patterns that provide background conditions for action, provide frameworks for interaction, and generally make social organization possible.¹²³ The basic idea behind *institutional harm* is that some agents are harmed by certain unjust institutional arrangements.

But harm or institutional harm is not necessarily wrong or unjust. For instance, some harms, including some institutional harms, are widely considered to be justified, as in the case of punishment in the form of incarceration for a crime.¹²⁴ Some harms are unavoidable and faultless, as with an incurable illness. So Cudd needs to supplement her institutional conception of harm with a “moralized account of coercion.”¹²⁵ In addition to institutional harm, she requires that “there is unjustified coercion or force that brings about the harm.”¹²⁶ For Cudd, a “necessary condition of coercion is that one lacks a

¹²¹ Wenar, L. (2010). Realistic Reform of International Trade in Resources. In: Jaggar, A. eds. 2010. *Thomas Pogge and His Critics*. Cambridge: Polity, p. 126.

¹²² Turner, J. (1997) *The Institutional Order*, New York: Longman.

¹²³ For a philosophical discussion of institutions, see Chapter 5: The General Theory of Institutions and Institutional Facts: Language and Social Reality in Searle, J. (2011). *Making the Social World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹²⁴ There are arguments against the justifiability of penal systems that are compelling. But for the sake of argument, let us assume that some forms of institutional harm are justified.

¹²⁵ Cudd, A. (2006). *Analyzing Oppression*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 131.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 25.

choice, but one has to lack choice in the right way to be coerced.”¹²⁷ How does Cudd conceive of lacking a choice as a form of coercion? If the lack of choice comes from the possibility of violence, the threat of material deprivation, or psychological processes, then one is lacking a choice because of coercion. Cudd offers three ways in which societal forces act as mechanisms for oppression: *violence as a force of oppression, economic forces of oppression, and psychological harms as a force of oppression.*

Through these coercive forces occurring within an institutional framework, members of oppressed groups are “harmed directly and indirectly by reducing [their] options relative to otherwise similarly situated members of society.”¹²⁸ It is by virtue of their social group membership and in juxtaposition to another distinct group (a privileged group) that oppressed groups are systematically coerced into situations with comparably fewer options. It is important to note that Cudd’s conception of coercion and institutional harm is a comparative notion. Cudd construes coercive reduction of one’s options to be a form of unjust institutional harm. She states that “an institution (economic, legal system, norm) is coercive if the situation unfairly limits the choices of some group of persons relative to other groups in society.”¹²⁹ In other words, the “right way” a group of persons can lack a choice in Cudd’s conception of coercion is by comparison with another group.

Consider the case of a traditional subservient housewife married to a violent man. The housewife belongs to a social group “women,” and the man belongs to a social group “men.” They live under the institution of marriage, which has historically played a major role in the subjugation of women, and as such is one component of the broader institution of patriarchy.¹³⁰ Patriarchy is an institution, and the London Feminist Network uses the term “patriarchy” “to describe the society in which we live today, characterized by current and

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 125.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 85.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 131.

¹³⁰ Chambers, C. (2017). *Against Marriage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

historic unequal power relations between women and men, whereby women are systematically disadvantaged and oppressed. This takes place across almost every sphere of life but is particularly noticeable in women's under-representation in key state institutions, in decision-making positions and in employment and industry. Male violence against women is also a key feature of patriarchy."¹³¹ According to the One Billion Rising movement, one in three women is a victim of violence, where most often the perpetrator of violence is an intimate partner.¹³²

The case of the subservient wife could be said to have all three forces of oppression that Cudd identifies. If we hone in on the idea that a key feature of patriarchy is the creation and sustenance of situational conditions conducive for violence against women, we can gain an understanding of *institutional harm* and the *coercion* that makes it wrong and unjust. Cudd contends that "violence is the most forceful and direct way to affect persons' options... [and] violence is and has always been a crucial component in the origin and maintenance of oppression."¹³³

Cudd is referring here to the notion of systemic violence, where the violence that some suffer does not consist in isolated, random acts, but is part of a system or institution of, for example, patriarchy. We can see how unjust institutions can be judged as harmful. They are harmful to the agents who are victimized by the injustice. Even though not every husband and wife relationship is violent, growing up in a patriarchal environment predisposes men to be violent towards women. The idea here is not that patriarchy deterministically causes men to be violent, but that it increases the probability of it.

¹³¹ Londonfeministnetwork.org.uk. (2018). *What is Patriarchy?* [online] Available at: <http://londonfeministnetwork.org.uk/home/patriarchy> [Accessed 10 Jan. 2018].

¹³² This is an injustice on Cudd's account because a society without violence against women is, *ceteris paribus*, better than a society with violence against women. On p. 125 of *Analyzing Oppression*, Cudd suggests that "a system is oppressive if it is inefficient relative to another system and thereby causes unnecessary misery and suffering."

¹³³ Cudd, A. (2006). *Analyzing Oppression*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, p. 85.

The subservient housewife may also be harmed by her economic dependency. As Cudd and Cohen point out, one's economic predicament can act as a coercive force. Perhaps the housewife failed to develop valuable skills outside the home. The housewife could be said to endure her violent husband because she relies on him for her material needs and survival, despite posing a threat to her life, physical safety, and emotional well-being.

Harmful psychological forces are also likely to be present. She may be frequently traumatized by his acts of violence; she may be humiliated and degraded. Culture, tradition, and her religious beliefs may also act as psychological forces that prevent her from telling other people about her predicament or reporting the abuse to the authorities. Her fear of him, fear of losing him, and fear of shame may significantly limit her options on a daily basis. This is the sense in which psychological forces can be coercive in Cudd's account. The housewife's options are reduced due to psychological coercion.

We now move on to Cudd's second and third criteria: the *social group* and the *privileged group* conditions. Because Cudd conceives of oppression as a collective phenomenon, it is unsurprising that she claims that *methodological individualism* – the claim that “all *explanations* of social phenomena must in principle be reducible to statements about individuals” – is “doomed as an explanatory dictum for the social sciences.”¹³⁴ Cudd wants to be able to capture or explain the wrong in oppression in non-individualistic terms because she understands oppression to be necessarily a collective phenomenon. Cudd explicitly states that the “harm [must be] perpetrated through a social institution or practice on a social group whose identity exists apart from the oppressive harm.”¹³⁵ Though Cudd has much to say about social groups, she is silent on what a *social group identity* is.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 46.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 25.

She begins her discussion of social groups by problematizing the distinction between two approaches that characterize social groups. First, there is the *intentionalist* approach, which claims that “social groups are formed and maintained by individuals who intentionally enter into them and maintain them through rules and norms, explicit or implicit.”¹³⁶ A paradigm case of an intentional social group is that of two people who get married. People who join a fraternity and who are having a conversation also count as intentional social groups because they intentionally and voluntarily join or create a group.

Cudd states that the intentionalist camp is “correct to see that action begins with the beliefs, desires, and capacities (both psychological and material) of the individual acting agent, but wrong to suppose that that rules out social forces beyond the control of that agent, forces that affect her beliefs, desires, and capacities.”¹³⁷ She points out that there are background conditions that may sometimes affect the intentional aspect of the social group. For instance, in a religious society where unmarried couples who live together are seen as committing a sin, there are strong external forces, which affect the degree of intentionality or voluntariness of the individuals who get married. Although the two agents are intentionally and voluntarily choosing to form a social contract with each other, the background conditions under which the decision is made play a very important role as well. This reveals that sometimes intention or intentionality can come in degrees.

The alternative to the intentional approach to social groups is called the *structuralist* approach. According to structuralists, “social groups are structural features of the social environment, formed by rules, norms, and practices, explicit and implicit, and include individuals who may never consider or even see that they are part of them, even though membership in the group

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 35.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 36.

has some effects on their lives.”¹³⁸ Here, a collection of individuals is considered a social group because of aspects of their identity that are unchosen but have effects on their lives.

Skin color and sex organs are paradigm cases because such features of a person are biologically given. Cudd is in agreement with the structuralist approach in their conception that “from the point of view of the acting individual, there are... unchosen groups to which she either belongs or does not, but which she cannot choose to enter or leave.”¹³⁹ However, she thinks that the structuralist approach makes the mistake of attributing “these [social groups] to immutable forces of history located beyond the influence and responsibility of individual human beings.” In other words, if the intentionalist gives too much weight to individual agency, the structuralist goes too far the other way and removes individual agency from the picture altogether, as if the way in which we behave towards others is fully determined by structural conditions outside of our control. Though norms, cultural practices, and social structures generally predispose us to act in certain ways, such predispositions are not deterministically guaranteed. Social structures both enable and constrain agency.

Cudd believes that both approaches “share the mistaken notion that intentionalist psychology is incompatible with the existence of irreducible social forces.”¹⁴⁰ She proposes a “compatibilist” conception of social groups, but, in the end, she seems to prefer the account offered by structuralists because she characterizes the social group that is most relevant for her project as “formed not by the intentions of the individuals in them to join together and share in a particular project, but by the actions, beliefs, and attitudes of others, both in the group and out, that constrain their choices in patterned and socially significant ways.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 35.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 46.

Cudd, then, asserts that “blacks and whites [even when belonging to the same socio-economic class] form two separate social groups”¹⁴² because of the differences in which they are judged and treated by others in their society “even when outwardly behaving in the same way.”¹⁴³ Cudd eventually defines a social group as “a collection of persons who share (or would share under similar circumstances) a set of social constraints on action.”¹⁴⁴ For the purposes of her project of defining what oppression is, it is important that her account of social groups can accommodate non-voluntary groupings which include “groups whose members are conscious of themselves as forming a social group [like people who join a religion], groups whose members are not so conscious [like people who are born into a religion], as well as non-voluntary social groups with members who mistakenly think they are not members [like racial minorities who do not believe that there is racism].”¹⁴⁵ Social groups are not only “explanatorily useful”¹⁴⁶ to Cudd; they are absolutely necessary for the conception of oppression that she is defending.

Notice, however, that Cudd’s second criterion does not only require that there is a harmed social group. Cudd requires that the harmed social group also have an *identity* that “exists apart from the oppressive harm,” and, unfortunately, we are left to speculate about what the difference between a social group and a social group identity is.

There are at least two ways in which we could interpret what Cudd means by “identity.” The first is *subjective* in which we require that members of the group see themselves as a group. They share a *subjective* perception insofar as they share a set of guidelines on their actions and behaviors. Even though Cudd claims to have an *objective* account of oppression, her account does not preclude the incorporation of a *subjective* component as among its

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 46.

criteria. A second conception of “identity” is also possible. She could mean it in a thinner, *objective* sense. Any true description of the group that does not mention the harm would count as an *objective* identity. We shall return to this distinction shortly.

Moving on to the third criterion, the privilege condition requires that “there is another social group that benefits from the institutional practice.”¹⁴⁷ To understand the privilege criterion, we just need to reconsider her definition of what a social group is. A privileged social group is constituted by a “collection of persons who share (or would share under similar circumstances) a set of social constraints on action.” We need to know, more precisely, what Cudd means by “constraint” so we can understand how her conception of social group also applies to her privileged group condition. By “constraint,” Cudd means something that is actually “normatively neutral, more in the sense of frame or guide.”¹⁴⁸ Constraints can be “positive or negative.”¹⁴⁹ Consequently, we can extrapolate that, for Cudd, a privileged group is “a collection of persons who share (or would share under similar circumstances) a set of [positive or negative] social [guides] on action.”¹⁵⁰ In other words, the privileged group is composed of persons who, under a certain description, share certain social privileges, which are actionable and observable through behavior.

Notice, however, that Cudd does not specify an *identity* requirement for the privileged social group in the way that she does with her second condition, the harmed social group condition. This has at least two implications. First, it makes her conception of a privileged social group easier to understand because she explicitly states what a social group is. All that is left for us to do is to add the idea of privilege to her definition, as we have done in the previous paragraph.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 42.

Secondly, this may also mean that, for Cudd, benefitting from the harm is, by itself, sufficient for inclusion into the privileged group. Having an identity requirement for the harmed group means that, in addition to the harm, the harmed collection of persons must also share an identity. Cudd likely includes an identity requirement in an effort to distinguish oppression from injustice more generally. In contrast, all that the privileged group condition requires is that its members are beneficiaries of the institutional harm, regardless of whether they share an identity or not.

Head slaves and women who benefit from patriarchy, for example, may not be considered oppressed on Cudd's account. They may have socially identifiable characteristics that could make them *prima facie* members of oppressed groups. But if, overall, they benefit from the institutional harm, Cudd's account renders them as members of the privileged group because the privileged group has no corresponding independent social identity requirement.

One might find this to be objectionable in that it excludes some "rightful" members of the oppressed group.¹⁵¹ But this objection is not overly damaging to Cudd's account because, as with any generalization, there are always exceptions. Head slaves were exceptions among the slaves. Women who benefit from patriarchy and non-whites who benefit from white supremacy are exceptions among their social kind. Cudd could simply bite the bullet and say that her account of oppression excludes those who could be socially identified as members of oppressed groups if and when they are net beneficiaries of the injustice.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ I thank Michael Garnett for this point.

¹⁵² In "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?", Sally Haslanger defines a woman as "someone whose subordinated status is marked by reference to (assumed) female anatomy." When confronted with the idea that "there could be females who aren't women in the sense [she's] defined," she insists that "these individuals (or possible individuals) are not counterexamples to [her] analysis" and that her "analysis is intended to capture a meaningful political category for critical feminist efforts, and non-oppressed females do not fall within that category." (p. 239 in *Resisting Reality*) Similarly,

2.1.1. The Social Identity Requirement as Exclusionary

Unfortunately, Cudd's account falls prey to Young's exclusionary worry. The problem lies in her social identity criterion. Cudd states that in order for the social identity criterion to be fulfilled, the group must have a social *identity* that is independent of the harm. Earlier, we speculated that there are at least two possible senses of "identity" — *subjective* or *objective*. An identity is *subjective* if it requires that the members of the harmed group view themselves as members of a social group. An identity is *objective* if it merely provides a way of picking out the group without reference to the harm. Either way, Cudd's account ends up being *exclusionary*.

The main problem with a *subjective* identity requirement is that sometimes, or at least at certain points in time, a group of individuals or isolated individuals could be precluded from having knowledge that they share common constraints on their action with others. Indeed, it is even possible that individuals might be unaware of the very existence of others with whom they share common social constraints.

In having a *subjective* conception of identity as one of the elements in her criteria for capturing what oppression is, Cudd makes the concept of oppression backward-looking. This has counter-intuitive results because charges of oppression are invalid until after a *subjective* identity is formed. This means that the existence of oppression is dependent on the disadvantaged group's knowledge of others with whom they share a common predicament.

But even if Cudd resorts to a thinner, *objective* conception of identity, her account would still be *exclusionary* because it would fail to include groups of people who are harmed and disadvantaged by institutional arrangements or

Cudd could argue that her conception of oppression simply discounts those who are not oppressed.

practices that do not share anything other than their shared harm or disadvantage. An *objective* interpretation of Cudd's identity requirement means that her account excludes the poor. We will examine the repercussions of a *subjective* conception of identity before moving on to a thinner, more *objective* conception.

2.1.1.1. A Subjective Interpretation of Cudd's Identity Requirement

On a *subjective* interpretation of Cudd's identity requirement, we encounter the problem of making claims of oppression dependent on knowledge of group membership. It is knowledge-dependent because it requires that the group of agents suffering harm view themselves as a group, and in order to do so they must know about the existence and the predicament of others. As we shall see in the examples below, there are situations wherein groups of people or a collection of individuals may be unaware of their shared unjust predicament.

2.1.1.1.1. Excluding the Onset of Colonialism

Cudd states that "colonialism occurs when a nation or a set of national or ethnic groups in a territory is forcibly occupied by a more powerful nation, with the intent of annexing or occupying the territory and its people for economic gain."¹⁵³ Cudd discusses colonialism as one of the earlier forms of oppression. However, she fails to recognize that her criteria for oppression, where her identity requirement is interpreted on *subjective* lines, could ultimately and unfavorably exclude the *onset* of colonialism as a form of oppression.

It has often been the case that prior to the colonization of a territory, there was no *subjective* social group identity to speak of. As Cudd herself notes, "the colonized territory is unified only by the colonizers' imaginations at

¹⁵³ Cudd, A. (2006). *Analyzing Oppression*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, p. 100.

first.”¹⁵⁴ The tribes in the Philippines, for instance, were not unified prior to the Spanish’ “discovery” of the archipelago. There was nothing that resembled a cohesive identity grouping together the disparate peoples living in the territory being colonized by the Spanish King. It is even possible that the tribes of one island were unaware of the existence of other tribes or islands. The Philippine historical situation is not exceptional. Colonialism has played an important role in the creation of national identities and establishing geographical boundaries. It seems counter-intuitive to say that the collection of people subjected to foreign domination only suffer oppression once they learn of each other’s existence, and only after they view themselves as members of the same group.

Of course, it is important to acknowledge that Cudd’s account, even on a *subjective* interpretation of identity, does eventually capture colonialism as a form of oppression. It is only the onset of colonialism that does not count as oppression. For Cudd, oppression involves “a long-term process, consisting of many events against a historical background of still previous events. It exists in the historical facts of systematic domination of social groups by other social groups, which, like Rome, could not be built in a day.”¹⁵⁵

Over time, colonized peoples learn of the existence of others with whom they share the common harm of being subjected to a foreign power. This usually serves as an impetus for the development or evolution of a national identity. But the evolution of an identity usually takes time, and there are plenty of logistical impediments for the creation of an identity. If colonialism is a form of oppression, it does not make sense that its onset cannot be counted as oppression, too.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p.100.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 167.

2.1.1.1.2. Excluding Impositions of Unjust Policies

Consider a revised example from Sally Haslanger.¹⁵⁶ Imagine a company, BigCo, that imposes an unjust policy on some — and importantly not all — of its employees. This policy is unjust to those subjected to it. The managers just randomly selected some individuals. Employees subjected to the unjust policy were informed individually and do not know that some of their colleagues are also victimized by the unjust policy. They are made to sign a contract that prevents them from discussing the new, unjust policy. This makes a *subjective* sense of identity impossible to cultivate. On a *subjective* interpretation of identity on Cudd's account, these employees do not suffer oppression because the employees do not know they share a common condition with others.

Let us alter the above BigCo scenario. The individuals subjected to the unjust policy know that they share a collective injustice and view themselves as a group. Given this, the identity criterion on a *subjective* interpretation is met, and on Cudd's account they are oppressed. But do we not have the intuition that the employees in the original scenario are more oppressed, especially since they were forced to sign a confidentiality clause? Even so, one could argue that Cudd's identity criterion is still not satisfied, as the identity that is formed is not an identity independent of the harm. The harmed employees are not part of any group with any special attributes that can be distinguished from the other employees in any way other than the harm.

On a *subjective* interpretation of identity, the agents in the disadvantaged group are only oppressed after they have developed a conception of themselves as a group. There are many ways in which a *subjective* social identity can arise, and suffering a common harm is one of them. Moreover, for the purpose of theorizing oppression, suffering a common

¹⁵⁶ Haslanger, H. (2013). *Oppressions: Racial and Other*. In S. Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 323.

harm is what matters. It seems that, at least sometimes, oppression is just the result of shared group harm. But, as the colonialism scenario shows, the evolution of a social identity could take time, and sometimes collectives and people can suffer great harms even in the absence of a social identity.

We do not want to exclude or lose the possibility of calling some group oppressed just because they fail to meet a *subjective* social identity criterion. If Cudd makes her conception of harm robust and stringent enough, it should be sufficient to exclude cases that we would not want to call oppression, whilst being able to include all cases that Young worried might be excluded. As Haslanger says, “it would be wrong... to claim that oppression only occurs once [a harmed collective] see themselves as a group and identify as members of the group.”¹⁵⁷

Finally, it is worth noting that Cudd does not seem to appreciate that oppression is both a material reality and a concept. She fails to appreciate the fact that we can distinguish between the phenomenon and the concept that linguistically represents the phenomenon. Like the concept of sexual harassment, it is important to recognize that oppression is a useful political concept, and this is why it is paramount that we are able to label the onset of colonialism and the onset of other instances of injustices befalling collectives as oppressive.

2.1.1.2. An Objective Interpretation of Cudd’s Identity Requirement

On a *subjective* conception of identity, Cudd’s account is *exclusionary* in unacceptable ways. We must, therefore, consider the alternative. If Cudd has a thinner, *objective* conception of identity, all that is required is that the group can be described in a way that does not mention the harm. For instance, the onset of colonialism might be counted as an instance of oppression if, instead of describing the group as “tribes subjected to foreign power,” the

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 324.

phrase “inhabitants of the archipelago” is used. The phrase “inhabitants of the archipelago” satisfies an *objective* interpretation of the identity requirement. That is all that is required in order for there to be an *objective* group identity that exists independently of the harm, whether the members of the group are aware of it or not.

Although intuitively appealing, adopting this *objective* conception of identity seems to be too *ad hoc* to be conceptually helpful. All that is required of us is to find ingenious and creative ways to refer to the harmed group that does not mention the harm. Cudd might as well drop the independent identity requirement if this is all that is needed to fulfill it.

2.1.1.2.1. Excluding the Poor

There is an even greater problem if an *objective* conception of identity is imposed on Cudd’s account. It cannot include the poor. Recall that Cudd says there must be “harm [that] is perpetrated through a social institution or practice on a social group whose identity exists apart from the harm in 1.”¹⁵⁸ This means that the group must share something other than a common (source of) harm. We must be able to describe the group in ways other than “Group X that is harmed by institution A or social practice B.”

This criterion may be fulfilled in the case of women and racial minorities in Western societies, inasmuch as these social groups can be said to have socially overt physical markers. Women can be referred to through biology or self-identification; racial minorities can be referred to by the color of their skin; colonized peoples can be referred to by specifying their geographic locations. But we cannot make the same case for all those who suffer economic-based oppression. When we say that the poor are oppressed, we are identifying their poverty as the thing that unifies them as a group, hence the term “global poor.”

¹⁵⁸ Cudd, A. (2006). *Analyzing Oppression*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, p. 25.

The economically oppressed is a diverse mix of people. It would be impossible to come up with an *objective* description that can include *all* the poor without reference to the harm of poverty. Although Cudd might insist that the poor have a social identity revealed through a multitude of ways (like the way they dress, their taste in film and music, their use of language, etc.), such identity is arguably not *independent* of the harm of poverty. While in the cases of women and racial minorities, we can see how there should be nothing intrinsic about one's sex organ or skin color that could make one subject to certain social constraints and privileges, the same is not true for economic oppression. A person dresses a certain way, prefers this or that music, has this or that accent precisely because of their economic capacity or lack thereof. A poor person's identity as poor is almost entirely conditioned by the fact of her poverty. Even if we agree with Cudd that the poor have a social group identity, such identity is entirely a product of and is completely dependent on their comparative economic incapacity. The poor's identity is, in other words, *necessarily* dependent on the institutional harm.

Moreover, oppression could be the result of unintended consequences. It is therefore important that we are able to use the harms that befall groups as a mechanism for describing oppression. For instance, there is no other way to describe the disadvantaged employees in the BigCo example except by referencing the harm, because it is their shared harm that carves out the social group. Groups are entities that share a property in common.¹⁵⁹ For purposes of oppression, groups are entities that share a common harm. There is no point in waiting for the harms to accumulate before we call it an instance of oppression, especially if everybody already agrees that there is a collective injustice. Although we might be able to come up with a description that does not involve the harm, what matters the most in making assessments of oppression is that there is a shared harm. The fundamental basis of oppression is shared harm from powerlessness.

¹⁵⁹ I thank Jasper Heaton for this point.

2.2. Summary of Cudd's Exclusionary Univocal Concept of Oppression

In this chapter, we studied Cudd's concept of oppression, the only explicit project to univocally define what oppression is in the existing philosophical literature. We focused on her four necessary and sufficient conditions and found fault with her *social identity* criterion. More specifically, her *social identity* criterion functions as an *exclusionary* mechanism which prevents her from capturing important instances of oppression, be that the onset of colonialism, the imposition of an unjust policy, or poverty.

CHAPTER THREE

Non-Univocal Conceptions of Oppression

3. Alternatives to a Univocal Conception

Our exploration of Ann Cudd's univocal concept of oppression confirms Young's suspicion that such an account will be *exclusionary*. There are at least two available alternatives to a univocal account. The first is offered by Sally Haslanger, who has a two-pronged conception of oppression. The second is offered by Young herself, which she calls the *Five Faces of Oppression*.

3.1. Haslanger's Two-Pronged Account

Despite her explicit pronouncement that the point of her discussion of oppression in "Oppressions: Racial and Other" is "not to offer an epistemic method or criterion for distinguishing oppression... from other rights and wrongs,"¹⁶⁰ Haslanger offers a helpful gloss on the concept of oppression. Though her explicit intention may be to develop a conception of oppression "which is useful for those concerned with group domination,"¹⁶¹ it is not clear that she herself makes a distinction between oppression and group domination.

Haslanger identifies two types of oppression: *agent* oppression and *structural* oppression. Agent oppression is characterized as "an act of wrongdoing by an agent: if oppression of this kind occurs then a person or persons (the oppressor(s)) inflicts harm upon another (the oppressed) wrongfully or unjustly."¹⁶² Rape and other forms of sexual violence are paradigmatic instances of gender-based agent oppression. An instance of police harassment where a police officer accosts a Black person walking

¹⁶⁰ Haslanger, H. (2013). Oppressions: Racial and Other. In S. Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 334.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 314.

around a shop would also be an instance of agent oppression. According to Haslanger, “in cases of agent oppression, the focus is on individuals or groups and their actions [and] it is the job of our best moral theory to tell us when the action in question is wrong.”¹⁶³

Structural oppression, on the other hand, is a “social/political wrong; that is, it is a problem lying in our collective arrangements, an injustice in our practices or institutions.”¹⁶⁴ For example, Western penal systems are paradigm cases of structural oppression. In 2014 in the UK, “28% of minority ethnic prisoners were foreign nationals.”¹⁶⁵ In the United States, “African Americans and Hispanics make up approximately 32% of the US population [whilst comprising] 56% of all incarcerated people in 2015.”¹⁶⁶ Although the US penal system and their police force’s practice of racial profiling has gained international scrutiny due to the Black Lives Matter movement, “according to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, there is now greater disproportionality in the number of black people in prisons in the UK than in the United States.”¹⁶⁷

The disproportionate representation of racial minorities does not, by itself, constitute injustice or structural oppression on Haslanger’s account. It is important for Haslanger that such statistical disproportionality happens within the context of racist norms, racist attitudes, and a racist culture. According to her, “in cases of structural oppression the focus is on our collective arrangements — our institutions, policies, and practices — and a theory of justice should provide normative evaluation of the wrong.”¹⁶⁸

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 314.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 314.

¹⁶⁵ Prisonreformtrust.org.uk. (2018). *Race and Prisons*. [online] Available at: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/ProjectsResearch/Race> [Accessed 10 Jan. 2018].

¹⁶⁶ NAACP. (2019). *NAACP | Criminal Justice Fact Sheet*. [online] Available at: <https://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/> [Accessed 8 Apr. 2019].

¹⁶⁷ Prisonreformtrust.org.uk. (2018). *Race and Prisons*. [online] Available at: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/ProjectsResearch/Race> [Accessed 10 Jan. 2018].

¹⁶⁸ Haslanger, H. (2013). *Oppressions: Racial and Other*. In S. Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 314.

Haslanger makes a distinction between social power and physical power. She rightly notes that most “examples of oppression concern an unjust exercise of power where the source of power or authority is social or institutional; such examples presuppose a background of social hierarchy (possibly just, possibly unjust) already in place.”¹⁶⁹ But instead of arguing for the view that oppression consists in the unjust exercise of social power, Haslanger argues that “oppression’s wrong lies in the use of power— not just social power but power of any kind, including physical power — to harm another unjustly.”¹⁷⁰ She uses the occurrence of same-sex rape as evidence that some forms of oppression “aren’t exercises of social power” and to ground the claim that oppression can therefore also be a matter of brute, physical force.

It is important to stress that Haslanger does not privilege agent oppression over structural oppression or vice versa. She believes that “an individualistic approach... is inadequate because sometimes structures themselves, not individuals, are the problem.”¹⁷¹ She is also against a purely structural or institutional conception because “it fails to distinguish [between] those who abuse power to do wrong and those who are privileged but do not exploit their power.”¹⁷² Haslanger’s understanding of structural oppression also preserves the possibility that “a structure motivated by good intentions may be unjust in its distribution of goods and power and in the social meaning of the relationship it creates.”¹⁷³

3.1.2. Haslanger’s Main Import

The most significant feature of Haslanger’s two-pronged account of oppression is agency. The role of individual agency has been practically

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 313.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 313.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 320.

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 320.

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 324.

absent in our previous discussions. The focus has been on the manner in which institutions and institutional arrangements systematically groups people into an objectionable hierarchy. The Marxist explanation for and Cudd's concept of oppression seem to offer little room for the discussion of agency and of how individuals commit acts or are victims of oppression.

The previous conceptions of oppression overwhelmingly conceive of oppression as an institutional or structural phenomenon. What results is the neglect of the role that individual agency plays in situations of oppression. Because Haslanger explicitly conceives of oppression as two-pronged, *agential* and *structural*, her account addresses this lacuna in at least some intuitive cases of oppression.

When, for example, Cudd states that an institutional harm is imposed on groups of individuals or that patriarchy normalizes violence against women, we do not think that such institutional arrangements and practices are, *by themselves*, causing violence against women. As an institutional arrangement, patriarchy merely makes violence against women probable. It is still individuals who commit acts of oppression and violence. Norms, institutional practices, and institutions themselves are dependent on individuals. Although oppression names a harm that befalls collectives, such harms are still and necessarily suffered by individuals. Conversely, if oppression also involves, as most theorists have argued, a privileged group who benefits from institutional harms, such privileges are enjoyed by individuals.

Haslanger's conception of oppression reminds us that "individuals play a role in creating and maintaining the social world."¹⁷⁴ She makes us more aware that "individual and structural issues are interdependent insofar as individuals are responsive to their social context and social structures are created, maintained, and transformed by individuals."¹⁷⁵ Haslanger is hinting

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 317.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 319.

at a two-way relationship between structures and individuals when she says that “an individual counts as an oppressor if their moral wrongdoing compounds the structural injustice, that is, if they are agents of oppression within an oppressive structure.”¹⁷⁶

3.1.3. Criticism: Too Inclusive

Unfortunately, while Haslanger’s attention to agency is a merit of her account, her conception of agent oppression coupled with her view that any abuse of power (including physical power) might be oppressive, pushes her account too far the other way. In contrast to Cudd’s univocal account, it ends up being too inclusive.

There is seemingly nothing in Haslanger’s analysis of oppression that would foreclose the possibility of any form of harm being counted as an instance of oppression. If one agent can oppress another and if any use of power, including physical power, can count as oppressive, then it is possible for Person A to claim that Person B oppresses her if he punches her. In fact, any harm that an individual causes another could be construed as oppression in Haslanger’s account. She is aware of this tendency, so she tries to protect her conception by stating that “it is not clear that all cases of an agent wrongfully causing harm should count as oppression... the harshness of the action and the abuse of power are factors that *may* [my italicization] distinguish oppression from other sorts of wrongful harm.”¹⁷⁷ The problem is that even such caveats, especially when offered as optional, are insufficient.

Haslanger seems to be stretching the concept of oppression too thinly. In her account, almost any harm could qualify as oppressive. A term that is too broad is useless. In allowing for the harm of oppression to befall an individual agent, we are losing something important and distinctive about oppression.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 317.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 314.

Although Haslanger's discussion of her two-pronged conception of oppression has enriched our understanding of oppression by allowing us to make sense of the role of individual agency and by demonstrating the relationship between agents and structures in situations of oppression, her account is ultimately too permissive and too inclusive.

3.2. Five Faces of Oppression

In *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Iris Marion Young systematically discusses the various ways in which people are oppressed without committing to a univocal definition. She explicitly states that she is not in the business of giving a "theory of oppression."¹⁷⁸ Instead, Young presents what she calls the *Five Faces of Oppression*, which could be categorized into two camps: *injustices of distribution* and *injustices of recognition*, to borrow terminology from Nancy Fraser.¹⁷⁹

Under *injustices of distribution*, we have *exploitation*, *marginalization*, and *powerlessness*. They focus on the relationship between the economic value or disvalue of one's labor to society. Though, of course, the status of one's labor has non-material implications, the injustices of distribution still primarily focus on how material resources are economically distributed and one's place in such a distribution.

Under *injustices of recognition* are *cultural imperialism* and *violence*. Such injustices are "[i]n essence a status injury, it is analytically distinct from, and conceptually irreducible to, the injustice of maldistribution, although it may be accompanied by the latter."¹⁸⁰ As Fraser argues, "[t]o be misrecognized... is not simply to be thought ill of, looked down on, or devalued in others' conscious attitudes or mental beliefs. It is rather to be denied the status of a

¹⁷⁸ Young, I. (2011). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 64.

¹⁷⁹ Fraser, N. (2013). *Fortunes of Feminism*. London: Verso, p. 176.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

full partner in social interaction and prevented from participating as a peer in social life — not as a consequence of a distributive inequity (such as failing to receive one’s fair share of resources or “primary goods”) but rather as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of interpretation and evaluation that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem.”¹⁸¹

Young starts off her discussion of the *Five Faces of Oppression* with Marx’s theory of *exploitation*. She problematizes the “legal freedom of persons”¹⁸² in capitalist societies, which seems to stand in contrast to the obvious unfreedom and injustice in slave and feudal societies. In slave societies, there is no question about whether there was oppression because the very institution of slavery (or at least formal slavery) is now almost unanimously considered to be unjust. According to Young, the challenge for today’s oppression theorist is answering the question “how can there be class domination” given that “everyone is formally free”?¹⁸³ The answer, for Young, lies in the “fact that some people exercise their capacities under the control, according to the purposes, and for the benefit of other people.”¹⁸⁴

Although Young and Cohen were contemporaries, Young invokes the traditional Marxist distinction between workers and capitalists instead of adopting the rich and poor distinction that the late Cohen prefers. Just like earlier Marxists, Young understands economic class as determined by one’s relationship to the means of production and not necessarily by one’s level of wealth. The workers, who comprise the vast majority of people in capitalist societies, have only their labor to sell to those who own the means of production.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 176.

¹⁸² Young, I. (2011). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 48.

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 49.

Like many Marxists, Young understands exploitation to be “enact[ing] a structural relation between social groups”¹⁸⁵ that brings about “a transfer of energies from one group to another to produce unequal distributions, and in the way in which social institutions enable a few to accumulate while they constrain many more.”¹⁸⁶ Young considers the conditions of workers to be exploitative and oppressive because one’s relationship to the means of production affects all spheres of one’s life. In capitalist societies, a person who has valuable labor skills has access to a more prestigious job. A prestigious job comes with status and money. The more money a person has, the more she can afford an overall better quality of life.

In capitalist societies, those who have capital have access to a lot of social goods, whilst those who only have their labor to sell suffer harms of relative “material deprivation.” Such material deprivation has implications on non-material aspects of life because there is a sense in which workers lose control over their time and daily life choices, which, Young argues, causes them to be deprived of important elements of self-respect. Moreover, unless workers can escape their class by accumulating capital, they are stuck in a vicious cycle of dependency where they need to work for their and their dependents’ survival. Even though there is an appearance of legitimacy because, unlike in slavery, individual workers are not owned by their individual employers, the working class (as a social group) remain subservient to capitalists (as a social group).

If workers are oppressed because they are exploited, some people are arguably even more oppressed because they are not exploited. If workers are oppressed because capitalists use them and their labor for their own self-interest and advancement, some are oppressed because the system of capital renders them useless. The second face of oppression that Young identifies is therefore *marginalization*, which she considers “the most dangerous form of

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 49-50.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 53.

oppression.”¹⁸⁷ She characterizes marginals as “people the system of labor cannot or will not use.”¹⁸⁸ In capitalist societies, being marginalized is worse than being exploited because those who are unable to work are, more often than not, unable to meet their most basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing. Such material deprivation means individuals barely survive on the fringes of society.

Young points out that many victims of marginalization are “racially marked,” but also include “old people, and increasingly people who are not very old but get laid off from their jobs and cannot find new work; young people, especially Black or Latino, who cannot find first or second jobs; many single mothers and their children; other people involuntarily unemployed; many mentally and physically disabled people.”¹⁸⁹ We can add to this list the growing number of undocumented migrants who are legally prohibited from engaging in paid labor.

But, Young continues, even when marginalization does not lead to material deprivation because of welfare provisions, it is still oppressive because such welfare provisions lead to dependency. Even if people are not materially deprived because a welfare state provides them with their economic and physiological needs, they are still deprived “of cultural, practical, and institutionalized conditions for exercising capacities in a context of recognition and interaction.”¹⁹⁰ More often than not, those who suffer marginalization are unable to exercise – or may even fail to develop – their productive capacities and skills.

The third face of oppression, which is still part of the economic category, is *powerlessness*. According to Young, the powerless are “those who lack authority or power... those on whom power is exercised without

¹⁸⁷ Young, I. (2011). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 53.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

exercising it... [those] who are situated so that they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them.”¹⁹¹ Here, Young introduces a distinction between *professional* and *nonprofessional* workers and argues that “professional workers are in an ambiguous class position.”¹⁹² Whilst they are still exploited as workers, they are usually educated and have acquired specialized knowledge and skills. They usually have the ability to advance in their careers. They have more choices about what work they will do, so they exercise a degree of control over their daily and overall lives. They usually have room for personal growth and career advancement. As professionals, their work is recognized and deemed valuable in society. They have status and prestige and can sometimes even become members of the capitalist class. They usually have power and authority over nonprofessional workers.

Nonprofessionals, on the other hand, “suffer a form of oppression in addition to exploitation”¹⁹³ because they are powerless. They “have little or no work autonomy, exercise little creativity or judgment in their work, have no technical expertise or authority, express themselves awkwardly, especially in public or bureaucratic settings, and do not command respect.”¹⁹⁴ Nonprofessionals usually have little room for career advancement and very few options regarding the work that they do. Their potential is unrealized. They usually do work that professionals do not want to do. They frequently suffer from “inhibition in the development of [their] capacities, lack [the ability to make decisions in their] working [lives], and [are frequently exposed] to disrespectful treatment because of the status [that they] occupy.”¹⁹⁵ They are usually much poorer than professionals and therefore live in relative poverty.

Exploitation, marginalization, and powerlessness are *injustices of distribution* because they focus primarily on the effects of one’s economic predicament and the value (or disvalue) of one’s skills and labor to society. A

¹⁹¹ Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 56-57.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 58.

person's economic capacity has tangible effects on her social life and overall wellbeing and status in society. A more concrete example of how money can buy a better life experience is by observing the difference between a first class and an economy airline passenger. The difference is not limited to having a better seat. The first-class passenger also has extra room for baggage, gets fast-tracked boarding, a better and wider selection of food and beverages, courtesy and special treatment from airplane staff. Likewise, a good income usually comes from having a socially prestigious job, which elevates a person's status in society, which, in turn, opens other opportunities and thereby increases one's freedom. These first three faces of oppression — exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness — all “refer to relations of power and oppression that occur by virtue of the social division of labor — who works for whom, who does not work, and how the content of work defines one institutional position relative to others.”¹⁹⁶

Moving on to *injustices of recognition*, we have *cultural imperialism* and *violence*. Young characterizes *cultural imperialism* as the way in which “the dominant meanings of society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as the Other.”¹⁹⁷ Cultural imperialism assumes the existence of a heterogeneous collective. The idea is that the cultural values and meanings of a particular, dominant group are seen as representative of an ideologically or culturally heterogeneous collective. Young cites “[t]he difference of women from men, American Indians or Africans from Europeans, Jews from Christians, homosexuals from heterosexuals, workers from professionals, becomes reconstructed largely as deviance and inferiority.”¹⁹⁸ Cultural imperialism involves the imposition of the meaning, values, and norms of a dominant group being applied to those in the dominated group, where those subjected to cultural imperialism are rendered either comparatively insignificant or downright invisible.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 59.

A concrete example of *cultural imperialism* can be seen in the English language, where the pronoun “he” and other masculine terms are used to refer to both men and women. Some feminists have pointed out that this practice excludes women and reinforces the dominance of men.¹⁹⁹ Women are conditioned to learn to identify with men and to see reality from men’s perspective. Men’s particular and non-inclusive perspective and experience are asserted “as universal and neutral” and established as the “norm” to which women are expected to adjust.²⁰⁰

Another example of cultural imperialism is the propagation of the distinction between the Global North and the Global South. Since the end of the Cold War, “carving up the world into Global North and Global South has become an established way of thinking about global difference.”²⁰¹ And yet many countries, especially former Soviet countries, do not fit into either category. The same is true for the terms “developing” and “developed” countries. In addition to being exclusionary to nation-states that do not fit either category, this distinction also imposes the neoliberal developmental paradigm as the only valid form of economic framework. The use of the term “America” and “Americans” to refer to the United States of America and its citizens, respectively, is also culturally imperialistic because it is exclusionary to other nations and peoples in the American continent. It would be like using the term “Asia” and “Asians” to refer only to China and the Chinese.

Finally, the fifth face of oppression is *violence*. Young notes that “theories of social justice [are] usually silent about [violence].”²⁰² She argues that such silence is unjustified because some forms of violence have an

¹⁹⁹ See Calhoun, C. (1989). Responsibility and Reproach. *Ethics*, 99(2), pp. 389-406 and Beauvoir, S. (2011). *The Second Sex*. New York, N.Y.: Vintage Books.

²⁰⁰ Young, I. (2011). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 60.

²⁰¹ Müller, M. (2018). In Search of the Global East: Thinking between North and South. *Geopolitics*, p. 1.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

institutional origin and therefore ought to be a subject of justice. Like Cudd, Young contends that “what makes violence a face of oppression is less the particular acts themselves... than the social context surrounding them, which makes them possible and even acceptable. What makes violence a phenomenon of social injustice, and not merely an individual wrong, is its systemic character, its existence as a social practice.”²⁰³ The idea here is that one’s inclusion in a particular social group could make one liable to “random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property.” Such violence is “systemic” because it occurs within a background of norms and cultural practices that enable such violence. The relationship between the violence and the social group is non-accidental.

The best way to understand Young’s conception of violence is by thinking of the idea of *rape culture*. Rape culture is used to “describe the pervasiveness and acceptability of rape-supportive messages in media and popular discourse.”²⁰⁴ Rape is a form of sexual violence where a person, usually a woman, is forced into sexual intercourse against her will. Even though rape is a crime, the social conditions that predispose persons, usually men, to commit rape are normalized. The “phenomenon of rape jokes, the prevalence of pornography glorifying rape, the common attitude that, in the case of women ‘no’ means ‘yes’”²⁰⁵ all point to the existence of a system that makes sexual violence almost an inevitability.²⁰⁶

Young contends that these *Five Faces of Oppression* are “objective” in that they are meant to “function as criteria for determining whether individuals

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 61.

²⁰⁴ Whisnant, R., “Feminist Perspectives on Rape.” The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), = <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-rape/> [Accessed 11 Jan. 2018].

²⁰⁵ Brison, S. (1998). Surviving Sexual Violence: A Philosophical Perspective. In: S. French, W. Teays and L. Purdy, ed., *Violence Against Women: Philosophical Perspectives*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 15.

²⁰⁶ In Nogradi, N. (2018). *Global Gender-based Violence Against Women as a Matter for Global Justice Theory: Pervasive Patriarchal Structures and Responsibility for Harm*. PhD. University of Leeds, Nogradi argues that patriarchy leads to violence against women.

and groups are oppressed.”²⁰⁷ The presence of even just one criterion is “sufficient for calling a group oppressed.”²⁰⁸ A group that is exploited is automatically understood as also oppressed. The criteria are not mutually exclusive. As Young insists, “different group oppressions exhibit different combinations of these forms, as do different individuals in the groups.” For example, “working class people are exploited and powerless... but if employed, [male], and white do not experience marginalization and violence.” Another benefit of having these *Five Faces* as criteria, argues Young, is that they make it “possible to compare oppressions without reducing them to a common essence or claiming that one is more fundamental than the other.”²⁰⁹

3.2.1. Criticism: Aversion to Explication

Although Young explicitly says that “all oppressed people face a common condition... it is not possible to define a single set of criteria that describe the condition of... oppressed groups,”²¹⁰ she has unwittingly provided an answer to the question of what the common condition oppressed people share. Although she does not privilege any of her *Five Faces of Oppression* as most relevant for distinguishing oppression, and she explicitly says that none is more “fundamental” than the other, a closer analysis reveals that one of her *Five Faces* can be construed as more fundamental than the others. It is arguable that, for Young, the “common condition” of oppressed peoples is a state of group-based *powerlessness*.

We can say that *powerlessness* is the most fundamental because it captures the condition of the exploited, marginalized, culturally imperialized, and the victims of group-based violence. Young’s *Five Faces* are five types of harm to which powerless people are vulnerable. To be exploited is to be

²⁰⁷ Young, I. (2011). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p.64.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

powerless with respect to one's terms of work. To be marginalized is to be powerless against being rendered worthless and defunct by the capitalist economic system. To be a victim of violence means that one is powerless against undeserved attacks on their person. To be a victim of cultural imperialism is to be powerless against being rendered invisible and inconsequential. This is the sense in which we could say that Young may have inadvertently answered the question of what oppressed people share — they are all in a state of group-based powerlessness. But if we simply characterize oppression as a state of powerlessness, our conception does not say much about what oppression is. In order to get a good understanding of what oppression is or involves or consists in, we need to ask what kind of powerlessness is embedded in the concept of oppression.

Even if we agree with Young that her *Five Faces* together capture what oppression is, there is still a further question to ask about what makes those *Five Faces* cases of oppression. What is it about exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence that they are all cases or manifestations of oppression? The answer requires what Ian Carter calls a metatheoretical analysis. We want to be able to explain “a basic conceptual structure that effectively captures and clarifies our shared sense that... [these *Five Faces*]... are nevertheless all talking about the same thing.”²¹¹

Young's primary project is not one of explication, conceptual clarification, or metatheoretical analysis. She does not explicitly offer a univocal characterization of oppression because to do that is to engage in a different *kind* of political philosophy from the one she wishes to pursue. An inquiry into the underlying feature or structure of the concept requires one to abstract from empirical conditions, and Young wants her work on oppression to be firmly grounded in and informed by the empirical world. As someone whose interest in oppression is primarily borne out of studying “new left social

²¹¹ Carter, I. (2015). Value-freeness and Value-neutrality in the Analysis of Political Concepts. In: D. Sobel, P. Vallentyne and S. Wall, ed., *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy Volume 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 299.

movements of the 1960s and 1970s”²¹² in the United States and who has expressed exasperation with how leftist politics “find[s] little kinship with contemporary philosophical theories of justice,”²¹³ this is unsurprising. Her work on oppression is an attempt to describe the actual realities that oppressed peoples face, partly as a reaction to philosophers’ over-emphasis on conceptual analysis and overuse of sanitized thought experiments.

As such, I can accept Young’s *Five Faces of Oppression* and use them to inform the meta-theoretical task at hand. The project of describing or defining “a single set of criteria that describe the condition of... oppressed groups” is not antithetical and may in fact be complementary to Young’s project of doing “sustained theoretical analysis of the concept of oppression.”²¹⁴ Her attempt to analyze oppression by looking at more empirical concepts related to it and our project of coming up with a univocal concept operate, as Carter puts it, “at different levels of abstraction.” We are not trying to replace Young’s *Five Faces of Oppression*. The task is rather to try explain why they are *Five Faces* of the same thing.

3.3. Summary of Non-Univocal Conceptions of Oppression

We have considered Sally Haslanger’s two-pronged conception of oppression followed by Young’s *Five Faces of Oppression*. Haslanger argues that there are two types of oppression: agent oppression and structural oppression. Haslanger’s account is significant in relocating the role of individual agency in situations of oppression. Ultimately, however, her account is problematic because her conception of agent oppression coupled with her argument that oppression is not limited to abuse of social power means that any unjustified harm could count as oppression. If Cudd’s univocal conception is untenable because it is *exclusionary*, Haslanger’s conception is untenable

²¹² Young, I. (2011). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 7.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

because it is too inclusive. As such, we lose the distinctiveness of the wrong of oppression, and we end up with a conception that is politically and theoretically useless.

We then discussed Young's *Five Faces of Oppression*, following Fraser in dividing them between *injustices of distribution* and *injustices of recognition*. Even though Young's *exclusionary* worry is legitimate – and has been vindicated by Cudd's univocal criterion – her proclamation about the impossibility of a univocal concept seems premature. Young, who is unsatisfied with her contemporaries' focus on conceptual analysis, is more interested in describing the realities that oppressed people face. Young is not really interested in meta-theoretical analysis, which is what is required of a project trying to find a common underlying feature or structure to her *Five Faces of Oppression*.

An attempt to discover or construct the basic conceptual structure of the concept of oppression is, therefore, not in competition with Young's *Five Faces of Oppression*. Although Young's worry about how a univocal theory of oppression would probably be unable to capture all forms of oppression has proven helpful for framing our discussion of the various accounts of oppression in contemporary literature, we can also see how her explicit philosophical project is methodologically antithetical to metatheoretical analysis or conceptual engineering.

CHAPTER FOUR

Domination and Internalized Oppression

4. Domination and Oppression

We can now turn to laying the foundations required for the construction of a univocal concept of oppression. The concepts of oppression and domination are often interlinked and, in many cases, used interchangeably. Therefore, an analysis of the concept of oppression would be incomplete without consideration of how domination contrasts with and relates to it. I analyze the concept of domination and distill elements useful for our concept of oppression.

According to Young, “social justice means the elimination of institutional domination and oppression.”²¹⁵ There is evidence that Cudd, Young and the republican philosopher, Philip Pettit, view “domination” and “oppression” as somewhat synonymous or at least closely related concepts. They are not the only ones who do this. Andrew Altman²¹⁶ and Sally Haslanger also treat these two concepts as if they were synonymous, with Haslanger implying that “group domination” is the same as “oppression.”²¹⁷ There is also corroboration that Marxists have used the terms synonymously, with Karl Marx using the term “oppression” in the *Communist Manifesto* and “domination” in *Capital*. Vladimir Lenin, following Marx, has also treated these concepts as

²¹⁵ Young, I. (2011). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 15.

²¹⁶ Altman, Andrew, "Discrimination", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/discrimination/>.

²¹⁷ On p. 333 of Haslanger, H. (2013). *Oppressions: Racial and Other*. In S. Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Haslanger writes “My goal has not been to analyze ordinary uses of the term ‘oppression’ or to legislate how the term should be used, but to highlight how we might better understand structural group domination.”

synonymous.²¹⁸ Paulo Freire, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,²¹⁹ and Jose Maria Sison,²²⁰ founder of the Communist Party of the Philippines, also consider them interchangeable.

Like Young, Pettit thinks that the best way to pursue justice is through maximizing the freedoms of persons, and this is done through the elimination of domination and oppression. As discussed in the previous chapter, Young does not explicitly explain what she means or refers to by the terms “domination” and “oppression.” Fortunately, Pettit has recently revived republicanism and defended a conception of freedom as non-domination. As such, he has also put forward an account of domination that is particularly helpful for understanding and conceptualizing the related concept of oppression. Given that Pettit’s essentialist concept of domination enjoys widespread acceptance and numerous authorities have used and continue to use “domination” and “oppression” interchangeably, relying on Pettit’s concept of domination should be uncontroversial.

4.1. Pettit’s Freedom as Non-Domination

Let us begin by examining Pettit’s account of non-domination. Pettit motivates his project of reviving republicanism by trying to prove that the republican conception of freedom as non-domination is “superior” to the liberal conception of freedom as non-interference.²²¹ Pettit points out that for most liberals following Isaiah Berlin, interpersonal interference *per se* is seen as an affront to freedom. Most liberals consider interference as antithetical to freedom and as always requiring independent justification. But, Pettit argues,

²¹⁸ On p. 9 of Lenin, V. (1992). *The State and Revolution*. Norwalk, Conn.: Easton Press, Lenin writes that “The State is an organ of class domination, an organ of oppression of one class by another; its aim is the creation of ‘order’ which legalizes and perpetuates this oppression by moderating the collisions between the classes.”

²¹⁹ Freire, P. and Ramos, M. (1996). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. London: Penguin Books.

²²⁰ In our personal communication.

²²¹ On p. 273 of Pettit, P. (1997). *Republicanism*. 1st ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Pettit writes that “[t]he superior value of non-domination needs to be established in a comparison with freedom as non-interference.”

interference might occur without domination and the former is not, by itself, objectionable, whereas the latter is. Interference is non-dominating when such interference tracks the avowed interests of those subjected to it. Domination is, on the other hand, the capacity to interfere, on an arbitrary basis, over the choices that individuals make. The basic difference between the liberal and the republican conception of freedom is that the republican one is compatible with, or possibly even comes with interference, so long as the interference is non-dominating in the sense that it is “forced to track the interests and ideas of the person suffering the interference.”²²²

4.1.1. Competing Accounts of Freedom and the Role of the State

To provide the broader context of Pettit’s account, it is helpful to touch on the basic differences of the main liberal conceptions of freedom and the role of the state. For a period of time, some liberals in academia relied heavily on the distinction between negative and positive liberty, as popularized by Isaiah Berlin in *Two Concepts of Liberty*.²²³ Berlin’s distinction between negative and positive liberty is indicative of the type of state that he thinks is justified. Negative liberty is freedom from external interferences, whereas positive liberty requires a more substantive conception of freedom as self-mastery. Berlin cautions against positive conceptions of liberty since they can license authoritarian social engineering projects. He argues that if we value liberty, we must content ourselves with a state that protects negative liberty because anything more may become a threat to liberty. Berlin associates the negative conception of liberty with a (good) liberal state, whereas the positive conception of liberty licenses a (bad) authoritarian state.

In introducing his conception of freedom as non-domination as a third alternative, Pettit appears to want to straddle the divide between a non-interfering classical liberal state and a rights-violating authoritarian state. In at

²²² Pettit, P. (1997). *Republicanism*. 1st ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 259.

²²³ Berlin, I. and Hardy, H. (2003). *Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

least some construals of the liberal state, especially those closer to the libertarian tradition, the state resists interfering because all forms of interference are construed as *prima facie* objectionable.²²⁴ Consequently, this type of liberal state is poorly suited to the task of *maximizing* freedom as non-domination because a state that subscribes to Berlin's conception of negative liberty would be wary of performing intentional action. As radical theorists have argued, Berlin's preferred liberal state has a default bias for the status quo. In the words of Catherine MacKinnon, the liberal "state legitimizes itself through non-interference with the status quo."²²⁵

The authoritarian state, on the other hand, is too ready to sacrifice rights for a political purpose. For Berlin, the Soviet Union's effort to spread socialism and its resort to coercion is a logical conclusion of a positive conception of liberty and is a decisive reason to reject positive liberty.²²⁶ Some positive conceptions of liberty typically require the state to be interventionist and obtrusive, which is another way of saying that the state should *interfere* or perform intentional actions to promote positive freedom.

Pettit's central contribution to this discussion is the idea that interference is, by itself, neither good nor bad. It is the content of the interference that can make it good (whenever it tracks the avowed interests of those subjected to it) or bad (when it fails to track the avowed interests of those subjected to it). Though the republican conception of freedom could be understood as a subset of a broader understanding of negative liberty in the sense that both republican and negative freedom accounts only require the absence of something as opposed to the presence of a notion of, for example,

²²⁴ It is important to acknowledge that there are many liberals who argue for (what could be called) radical state-sponsored interventions to the status quo. Clare Chambers, author of *Sex, Justice, and Culture*, for example, argues for a state ban on breast implants. As such, it must be stressed that the target of this objection may only apply to a particular interpretation of the liberal state.

²²⁵ MacKinnon, C. (1989). *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, p. 164.

²²⁶ Berlin, I. (2004). *The Soviet Mind: Russian Culture Under Communism*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press.

self-mastery, there are still some important conceptual differences between the two.

4.1.2. Non-Arbitrary Interferences Are Constitutive of Freedom

Let us consider two examples that highlight the distinction between negative liberty and republican freedom. First, consider the case of a slave with a benevolent master. Proponents of a negative conception of liberty can be compelled to admit that a slave who does not suffer interferences because her or his master is benevolent is free. Of course, a slave with a benevolent master is better off than a slave with a malign master. Still, there is something intuitively implausible in the idea the former slave is free, that the reason we think the former slave is better off is because she is freer. This is problematic for proponents of negative liberty because, on their account, a slave who does not suffer interferences is free.²²⁷

The republican conception of liberty can make sense of this, given that what is required for republican freedom is not merely that a person suffers no interferences but also that a person is not subject to potential interferences. Republican freedom requires the abolition or reform of social institutions or unjustifiably inegalitarian background distributions of power that enable the exercise of arbitrary power over others. Republican freedom requires the creation of laws, institutions, and norms that ensure that individuals are not vulnerable to the arbitrary power of others. Where defenders of negative freedom might be forced to describe slaves who do not suffer interferences as free, republican freedom unambiguously requires the abolition of the institution of slavery.

Consider another example that can guide our understanding of freedom as non-domination: traffic rules. Such rules and regulations can help us

²²⁷ Lovett, F. "Republicanism." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), = URL <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/republicanism/> (retrieved 23/01/2018).

understand why Pettit's conception of freedom as non-domination is better than freedom as non-interference. Traffic rules and regulations can be construed as interferences on people's liberties because they constrain people's driving behavior. Traffic rules limit the choices that people have; they cannot drive in whatever way they want. A proponent of freedom as non-interference cannot make sense of why such rules and regulations — interferences — actually promote, create, and could be *constitutive* of freedom. The reason why traffic rules and regulations promote and create people's freedom is because everyone benefits when traffic rules and regulations are enforced. Regardless of how fast your car is, you will get to your destination faster and safer if there are enforced norms governing driving. This is why the state and other coercive mechanisms that govern society and human interaction might be understood as actually being constitutive of freedom.

A proponent of negative liberty might see this example as a strawman. Surely, where the benefits of interference arguable greatly and obviously outweigh the costs, a proponent of non-interference could understand these limited interferences by the state — the traffic rules — as maximizing overall non-interference. But whilst this argument could be made, it is important to recognize that no proponent of negative liberty explicitly uses the language of “maximizing non-interference” or “maximizing freedom as non-interference.” The idea of “maximizing freedom” is distinctly republican, especially in Pettit's sense of republican. Given that Pettit believes that states satisfy the requirements of agency and that the sole purpose of the state is to maximize freedom as non-domination, it follows that his political theory requires a state that is active and dynamic. This brings us back to the earlier point about how the proponent of negative liberty has implications for how the state should act or behave. No proponent of negative liberty explicitly says that the state should maximize freedom as non-interference because proponents of negative liberty usually want the state to remain neutral (or inactive) between competing conceptions of the good or between different elucidations of interests. The

idea that freedom should be maximized requires a state that is willing to perform intentional action.

Moreover, in more complex situations of injustice, where we must weigh the interests of one significant collective against the interests of another significant collective, proponents of non-interference like Berlin would most likely advocate exactly that: non-interference by the state. Whereas proponents of non-domination would require the state to actively interfere to promote non-domination between competing interests, it is unclear whether proponents of non-interference could offer practical guidance on what the state should do when presented with competing interests.

4.1.3. Remnants of Individualism

Despite grounding his theory in human sociality, Pettit's conception of liberty may still be accused of preserving liberalism's individualistic focus: he conceives of freedom as non-domination, and domination is primarily understood as a relationship between two agents.²²⁸ There is near unanimous agreement amongst theorists that oppression is a collective phenomenon.²²⁹ As such, it may seem that Pettit's theory of domination may be inappropriate for constructing a theory of oppression because his conception of freedom is individualistic.

However, Pettit's republican theory of freedom is not as individualistic as it appears. He conceives of freedom and domination as inherently and unequivocally institutional. He emphasizes the role of the state, institutions, and social arrangements — in a manner more common to holists and not methodological individualists — in freedom's attainment or its very possibility. So whilst he preserves the focus on the freedom of individuals, his conception privileges the collective aspect of freedom or the "condition under which you

²²⁸ I thank Michael Garnett for this point.

²²⁹ Haslanger is an exception.

live in the presence of other people but at the mercy of none.”²³⁰ More precisely, Pettit’s conception of freedom is relational in that a person is considered free only to the extent that she or he is free from domination or arbitrary interferences from other people or agencies.

As Pettit argues, “freedom as non-domination is... a communitarian good. It can only be realized for one person only so far as it is realized for others in the vulnerability cases to which that person belongs: thus, a woman can be fully free in this sense only so far as womanhood is not a badge of vulnerability, only so far as all women are free.”²³¹ If being a woman means that one could be subjected to arbitrary interferences, then one is dominated and therefore unfree. The goal of advancing freedom as non-domination pertains to the issue of how social institutions are arranged, as Pettit points out: like the immunity produced by antibodies in the blood, the non-domination is constituted by such institutional arrangements: it has an inherently institutional existence.²³² Although domination is a wrong done to individuals, domination is construed as the absence and failure of state mechanisms to protect individuals from arbitrary interferences. Domination is a collective wrong — a wrong that citizens of a republican state do — to an individual.

As such, freedom as non-domination is not something that “can be left to people to pursue for themselves in a decentralized way... it is best pursued via the state.”²³³ Pettit even goes as far as to say that “the institutions which promote people’s freedom as non-domination go to constitute that freedom, not cause it.”²³⁴ The state of not suffering from arbitrary interferences is the state of being free in Pettit’s republican sense, and it invariably requires state-sponsored non-arbitrary interferences.

²³⁰ Pettit, P. (1997). *Republicanism*. 1st ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 80.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

²³² *Ibid.* p. 108.

²³³ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Social contract theorists all argue that a state is necessary to escape the state of nature, and Max Weber famously characterized the state as an entity that has legitimate monopoly of force.²³⁵ As such, a state is an entity that has the ability and perhaps even the responsibility to interfere in order to maximize freedom and equality. In the words of Pettit, “there is no law without interference.”²³⁶ It is not surprising, therefore, that in the discussion above, the different views on liberty also have implications for differing roles of the state.

4.2. Subjective Conception of Interests and Internalized Oppression

Let us now turn to another aspect of Pettit’s account of non-domination – the notion of someone’s interests. In his most recent formulation, Pettit makes clear that “Someone, A, will be dominated in a certain choice by another agent or agency, B, to the extent that B has a power of interfering in the choice that is not itself controlled by A.”²³⁷ Pettit could, then, be said to have a subjective conception of interests in the sense that those who are liable or subjected to interferences are the ones who determine what is (and what is not) in their interests. For him, the notion of interests is dependent upon people’s subjective assessments – through their choices and preferences.

4.2.1. Pettit’s Subjective Conception of Interests

Pettit has written two books where he discusses what domination is. In his earlier formulation, which can be found in *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, Pettit defines domination as a relationship between two agents, where one has the capacity to arbitrarily interfere with the choices of another.²³⁸ In some formulations in this book, Pettit sometimes refers to both choices or ideas and interests in the determination of domination.²³⁹ However,

²³⁵ Waters, D. and Waters, T. (2015). *Weber's Rationalism and Modern Society*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

²³⁶ Pettit, P. (2012). *On the People's Terms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 10.

²³⁷ Pettit, P. (2012). *On the People's Terms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 50.

²³⁸ Pettit, P., 2010. *Republicanism*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, p. 52.

²³⁹ Pettit, P., 2010. *Republicanism*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press. pp. 247 and 272.

in his most recent formulation in *On The People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy*, Pettit reformulates domination as "Someone, A, will be dominated in a certain choice by another agent or agency, B, to the extent that B has a power of interfering in the choice that is not itself controlled by A."²⁴⁰

There are two crucial differences between the first and Pettit's more recent formulation of domination. The first is the replacement of interests with choices; the second is the replacement of "arbitrary" with "uncontrolled." In *On the People's Terms*, Pettit no longer vacillates between an account of domination that relies on choices or an account that relies on interests, as he did in *Republicanism*. He now also makes clear that there could be a distinction between choices and interests evidenced in his discussion of how paternalism involves "interference in your choice according to your interests, though not necessarily according to your wishes."²⁴¹ As such, given that in his most recently defended account where he unequivocally relies on people's choices and wishes, we can attribute a *subjective* conception of interests to Pettit. This means that people's desires, preferences, choices, and wishes are operative in the determination of domination. He insists that the "most that might be allowed on [his] republican view is interference according to interests that you are disposed or ready to avow, where that readiness is easily tested and established; only this could give you the control required to avoid domination."²⁴²

Pettit's subjective understanding of interests seems intuitively plausible. It captures our intuition that there is a direct relationship between choices and freedom. The more choices we have, the more freedom we also have. A person who can choose between options X and Y is less free than a person who can choose between X, Y, and Z. This intuition could, however, also be captured

²⁴⁰ Pettit, P., 2012. *On The People's Terms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 50

²⁴¹ Pettit, P., 2012. *On The People's Terms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 58.

Pettit is wrong to assert that paternalism is an "exemplar" of domination, but I digress.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 59

by an objective notion of available options. One could argue that what matters is not whether someone *feels* that they have a lot of choices but whether they objectively (or mind-independently) have more options on possible courses of action. Having said that, an increase in the possible available courses of action may also mean an increase in choices, if certain epistemic conditions are met.

Another important difference between Pettit's earlier formulation of domination and its reformulation in *On The People's Terms* is the replacement of the term "arbitrary" with "uncontrolled." He justifies this terminological amendment by saying that whilst "in earlier republican uses of the word, [it] had something close to the meaning [he] ascribe[s], it has other, misleading connotations today."²⁴³ He then goes on to discuss two ways in which the term "arbitrary" is problematic. First, he points out that an interference could be characterized as arbitrary "when it is not subject to established rules."²⁴⁴ But he says that this is still problematic because an interference could conform to rules (making it non-arbitrary in that particular sense), whilst still being uncontrolled by the person subjected to the interference (making it arbitrary in Pettit's sense).

Secondly, he points out that "arbitrary" is axiologically variable, meaning that "what is arbitrary from one evaluative standpoint may not be arbitrary from another."²⁴⁵ He then argues that, in contrast, "uncontrolled interference is going to count as uniformly objectionable in most moral views."²⁴⁶ He asserts that "uncontrolled interference" has a "perfectly descriptive, determinable meaning and people can agree on when it applies and does not apply, independently of differences in the values they espouse; it is not a value-dependent or moralized term."²⁴⁷

²⁴³ Ibid., p. 58.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 58.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 58.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 58.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 58.

At this point, it is helpful to take a step back from the details of Pettit's account of domination to reflect on the overall purpose of Pettit's two disparate philosophical projects. In *Republicanism*, where Pettit first gives his account of domination, his explicit goal is to construct *A Theory of Freedom and Government*. In this particular book, he is just beginning to articulate a competing theory of freedom that he argues is superior to the prevailing, dominant liberal account. But in his second book, *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy*, his focus is on how his republican theory of liberty requires democracy or that the state is controlled by its citizenry. It is a republican justification for democracy. The main targets of his analyses are the state and its citizens. Given that Pettit is going against the liberal current of understanding the notion of interference as something inherently objectionable, he perhaps is rightly worried about how his political theory could be used to justify the domination of people by the state. Pettit is concerned about how the republican state, with its fundamental commitment to maximizing freedom as non-domination, could be licensed to commit acts of interferences that do not track the choices and preferences of its citizenry. This is why Pettit needs to be committed to a *subjective* conception of interests. If he were to adopt a more *objective* conception of interests, he would be in danger of losing the citizenry as the ultimate determiner for what the state can and cannot do.

Even though Pettit is aware of the potential discrepancy between people's choices and their actual objective interests, his goal of constructing a republican theory of democracy prevents him from investigating the nature or the potential reasons for why people can be mistaken about their interests. At the end of the day, his goal in *On The People's Terms* is to convince us that his republican conception of freedom requires a state that is controlled by its citizenry. As such, he cannot take seriously the idea that people can be wrong about what is good and right for them because that will undermine his primary goal of defending democracy as the only system of government compatible with republican liberty. He is worried about empowering the republican state

to make choices and decisions that do not reflect the avowed preferences of its citizenry.

For the purposes of this dissertation, Pettit's earlier formulation of domination is better. It is more apt to use the concept of interests (rather than choices) and the concept of arbitrariness (rather than uncontrolled) in characterizing domination and oppression. Let us begin with why his subjective conception of interests ought to be rejected before moving to the discussion of why using "arbitrary" is better than "uncontrolled." As I have argued, Pettit's commitment to democracy requires him to have a *subjective* conception of interests, which simply cannot work for a theory of oppression. There is an overwhelming consensus among theorists of oppression that the oppressed suffer from adaptive preferences, deformed desires, or false consciousness. There is such a thing as internalized oppression, which could prevent people from being reliable judges of what is in their actual objective interests.

Though he identifies three ways in which someone's choices could be restricted – by removing options, by replacing options, or by misrepresenting options – his commitment to defending democracy means that he cannot abandon the language of choice or take seriously the idea that multitudes can be wrong about what their actual objective interests are. Pettit must understand interests as only determinable subjectively because acceding to the idea that people can choose options that are detrimental to their interests would undermine the aim of his explicit project, which is to prove that the republican conception of freedom requires a democratic state that is controlled by its citizenry. His goal to defend democracy means that his theory has little room for false consciousness or internalized oppression.

Perhaps the closest he gets to problematizing the discrepancy between choices and interests is in his discussion of deception and manipulation. He muses that people can be deceived about the options available in a choice.

Someone could lead another “to believe that the options are other than, as a matter of fact, they are.”²⁴⁸ Pettit contends that manipulation can “deny you the possibility of making a choice on the basis of a proper understanding of the options on offer.”²⁴⁹ He identifies “mesmerizing you with the prospect of extraordinary rewards, making you feel guilty about not doing what I wish, snowing you with so much information that you are putty in my hands, or exposing you... to the undermining power of my rhetoric”²⁵⁰ as ways in which people’s choices or ability to choose could be compromised.

But even allowing for such possibilities is still insufficient and problematic for a theory of oppression because in many severe cases of oppression, people can and do genuinely choose options that are bad for them. The oppressed can choose options that are detrimental to their interests even if there is no manipulation or deception involved. This is why many theorists working on oppression problematize the complicity of the oppressed in their own oppression. Take, for example, Clare Chambers’ arguments in *Sex, Justice, and Culture: The Limits of Choice*. She contends that “preferences are socially formed in ways that can perpetuate harm and inequality.”²⁵¹ She is worried about how some liberals’ way of valuing autonomy can contribute to the reproduction and perpetuation of oppressive social practices and norms due to the fact that individuals can and do voluntarily choose objectionable options. Chambers calls on us to join her in “refus[ing] to respect those desires [or choices] which themselves undermine respect for the desiring [or choosing] individual.”²⁵² Ann Cudd is in agreement with Chambers here. She notes that “the oppressed are co-opted into making individual choices that add to their own oppression.”²⁵³ She points out that oppressed people are confronted with “structural constraints that cause them

²⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 54.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 57.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 55.

²⁵¹ Chambers, C., 2009. *Sex, Culture, And Justice: The Limits Of Choice*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, p. 195.

²⁵² Ibid., p. 199.

²⁵³ Cudd, A., 2006. *Analyzing Oppression*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 154.

to structure their own preferences and make decisions that then come to perpetuate their oppression.”²⁵⁴ These insights clearly show that Pettit’s reliance on people’s choices means that his subjective account of interests, though indispensable for a theory of democracy, must be abandoned for a theory of oppression, which relies on an objective account of interests.

Now, before moving on to the literature on internalized oppression, where I shall further demonstrate that the oppressed choose options that are bad for them, I shall briefly address Pettit’s decision to replace “arbitrary” with “uncontrolled,” and why the former is better suited for the task of formulating a unified theory of oppression. Pettit rightly notes that the term “arbitrary” will vary from one evaluative standpoint to another, and this is precisely the reason why “arbitrary” is more apt in developing a univocal account of oppression. Given the fact of the plurality of value systems and the diversity in the available conceptions of interests, the notion of “arbitrary” can therefore adequately capture the various ways in which people conceive of oppression. The ideological indeterminacy inherent in the concept of “arbitrary” is indispensable in the pursuit or construction of a sufficiently inclusive unified criterion for oppression.

Additionally, Pettit’s decision to replace “arbitrary” with “uncontrolled” in *On The People’s Terms* is, again, motivated by his commitment to defending democracy. In his earlier formulation in *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, he was primarily problematizing the freedom of individuals vis-à-vis other individuals. In *On The People’s Terms*, he shifts his focus and inquires into the question of how individuals can be free even when subjected to the interfering will of a republican state. One of the ways in which he addresses this issue is by replacing “arbitrary” with “uncontrolled” in his definition of domination. This amendment gives him the favorable result that democracy is the only form of government that is compatible with republican freedom. Given that Pettit conceives of the state as an entity whose primary

²⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 152.

task is to maximize freedom as non-domination, it is of pivotal importance that such state is controlled by its citizenry. “Uncontrolled” is a better term for Pettit given that he has a subjective account of interests because it makes misunderstanding less likely, but it does not work for a theory of oppression that relies on an objective account of interests.²⁵⁵

So, to recapitulate, there are two reasons why “arbitrary” is preferable to “uncontrolled” for a unified account of oppression. First, “arbitrary” is conducive for a univocal criterion due to its inherent ideological indeterminacy. Secondly, Pettit’s replacement of “arbitrary” with “uncontrolled” is partly due to his specific aim to defend democracy. Of course, this second reason does not, by itself, mean that “uncontrolled” does not do the task of “arbitrary” better. But, hopefully, an awareness of how Pettit’s aims have changed can explain why he amended his conception of domination, and recognizing that his particular aim in *On The People’s Terms* is distinctive for a philosophical defense of democracy means that his earlier formulation is more compatible with the aims of this doctoral project. Now that we have analyzed the nuances in Pettit’s formulations of domination, we can move on to the literature on internalized oppression, which would bring home the point for why Pettit’s subjective conception of interests is unusable for a theory of oppression.

4.2.2. Internalized Oppression

Human beings are molded into becoming participants of social organization through a process called socialization. Socialization involves internalizing the norms, values, ideologies, practices, behavior, and social skills that are appropriate to an individual’s social position. As Michael Garnett notes in “Agency and Inner Freedom,” being subjected to “oppressive internalized norms” is one of the problematic ways in which we can be rendered unfree.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁵ I thank Michael Garnett for this point.

²⁵⁶ Garnett, M. (2015). Agency and Inner Freedom. *Noûs*, 51(1), pp.3-23.

If the society in which an individual finds herself in is hierarchical, the individual must internalize such hierarchies in order to function well. If one is born to a family who has a hierarchical view of siblings, where the eldest is conferred a status of authority over her or his younger siblings, those children will be expected, and, as such, conditioned to behave in accordance with that hierarchy. The younger children must learn to obey the eldest, the eldest needs to learn to control her or his siblings, and all will suffer penalties for failing to maintain the hierarchy within the family.

Applying the same logic to the individual in wider society, people must internalize social hierarchies in society in order to function well. If one is born into an oppressive society, then one is compelled to internalize oppressive norms and social practices. Once internalization is successful, it becomes harder to see the injustice in the hierarchy because it becomes ingrained in one's psyche as just how things are. Hierarchies become part of the background conditions that both enable and constrain behavior. Hierarchies are often rendered invisible through normalization. If an individual is a member of an oppressed group, then that person must internalize norms relevant to her social position in order to function well. As such, many oppression theorists have argued for the view that oppression reduces or undermines the agency of the oppressed.

Pettit's conception of interests is problematic because, in many cases of oppression, choices and interests are in conflict. More specifically, membership to an oppressed group typically involves internalization of oppressive norms that makes one behave in a way that is appropriate to one's oppressed status in society. And because oppression is often construed as a structural phenomenon, inescapable through any exercise of individual agency, the oppressed must internalize their subordinate status or suffer the social costs of deviance. Deviance can come in degrees and various forms. It ranges from flouting norms and expectations to joining activist groups. Some

have suggested that deviance could even mean criminality.²⁵⁷ This is what makes oppression a particularly difficult form of injustice, because oppression sometimes refers to normalized wrongs, and there are genuine social and psychological benefits to those who contribute to the maintenance of the status quo. When one internalizes an unjust hierarchy, one becomes an unwitting participant in the maintenance of that hierarchy. This is why people can be wrong about what their actual interests are. This is “internalized oppression.”

There are many cases of domination and oppression where the dominated and the oppressed do not have an accurate conception of what their interests are. It is possible and, indeed, likely that agents form preferences and choices that are inimical to their interests, where the satisfaction of such preferences would result in the reduction of their overall wellbeing.

This phenomenon of internalized oppression can also be explained by Jon Elster’s theory of adaptive preference formation.²⁵⁸ According to Elster, our preferences are, for the most part, shaped and formed against a backdrop of our knowledge, experience, and what we think are courses of action available to us. When a person intentionally changes her preference as a response to new information, experiences, and deliberation, she is making a genuine change in preferences. However, according to Elster, some of our preferences change in response to available opportunities without our control or even awareness. He calls these kinds of preferences “adaptive preferences.”

²⁵⁷ Koshka Duff argues for the view that the criminal is political in Duff, Koshka. (2018) ‘The Criminal Is Political: Policing Politics in Real Existing Liberalism.’ *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, pp. 485-502.

²⁵⁸ Elster, J. (1982). *Sour grapes - Utilitarianism and the Genesis of Wants*. In: A. Sen and B. Williams, ed., *Utilitarianism and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.219-238.

To illustrate how adaptive preference formation works, Elster reminds us of the Aesop fable about the fox and the grapes. The fox repeatedly failing to procure the grapes forms the false or at least unjustified belief that the grapes are sour and declares that it does not want them. Instead of suffering psychological hardship due to the frustration of the desire, the fox convinces itself that the thing desired is actually undesirable. But, of course, the belief that the grapes are sour is not a justified belief. The fox engages in a form of self-deception in order to avoid frustration. To be sure, there is some genuine psychological relief experienced by oppressed people who learn to adjust their preferences to accommodate the fact of reduced options.²⁵⁹ As the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft says “independence I have long considered as the grand blessing of life, the basis of every virtue; and independence I will ever secure by contracting my wants, though I were to live on a barren heath.”²⁶⁰

We will now turn to the problems with Pettit’s subjective conception of interests as it applies to gender, race, and class. We shall delve into the problem of deformed desires, internalized racism, and the psychological harms of poverty to show why Pettit’s reliance on a subjective conception of interests must be rejected.

4.2.2.1. Deformed Desires

In feminist philosophy, Sandra Bartky coined the term “deformed desires” to refer to desires formed under unjust social conditions, where such desires, if satisfied, are detrimental to the wellbeing of the agent. It is important that the desire meets the second criterion of being detrimental to the wellbeing of the desire-holder, because the assumption of patriarchy could mean that all desires, including those held by and are beneficial to men, are deformed, if only the first criterion is satisfied.

²⁵⁹ Lillehammer, H. (2014). Minding Your Own Business? Understanding Indifference as a Virtue. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 28(1), pp.111-126.

²⁶⁰ Wollstonecraft, M. (2015). *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*. Lexington, KY: Forgotten Books, p. 19.

Bartky claims that women under patriarchy have learned to internalize external forces of oppression as a defense or coping mechanism for their powerlessness. Instead of rejecting or challenging such forces, women have adapted their beliefs, behaviors, and preferences in order to fit better into a patriarchal world-order. Patriarchal power and external forces of oppression “make the work of domination easier by breaking the spirit of the dominated and by rendering them incapable of understanding the nature of those agencies responsible for their subjugation.”²⁶¹

According to Bartky, women living under patriarchy are, from their earliest years, subjected to oppressive patriarchal forces. They are treated as subordinates and are taught to be servile to men; they are frequently reduced to their appearance; they are encouraged to exemplify feminine virtues of chastity, docility, and servility. They are discouraged from participating in politics, business, and suffer social sanctions when they are assertive or display what are typically considered as masculine qualities. Because women live in a world where they get paid less than men for doing the same work, where they are constantly sexually objectified, where they experience more obstacles to accessing prestigious and high-paying jobs, they are – like the fox – pushed to form (false) beliefs. Women are compelled to believe that a woman’s place in society is in the home, that women must submit to men, and that their value is inextricably linked to their appearance.

Similarly, where domestic violence is normalized, a battered wife could view her beatings as deserved. As pointed out by Marilyn Friedman, Pettit’s reliance on a subjective conception of interests means that a battered wife who thinks she deserves her husband’s beating is not dominated by her husband.²⁶² If we accept the idea that many forms of oppression occur where

²⁶¹ Bartky, S. (1990). *Femininity and Domination*. New York: Routledge, p. 23.

²⁶² Friedman, M. (2008). Pettit’s Civic Republicanism and Male Domination. In: C. Laborde and J. Maynor, ed., *Republicanism and Political Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, p. 263.

there are legitimating forces, especially cultural forces, then a defensible theory of oppression must have space to accommodate the likelihood that that people's conception of what their interests are can be unreliable and problematic.

4.2.2.2. Internalized Racism

We find documentary evidence of internalized racism as early as the 1940's when psychologists and civil rights activists Mamie and Kenneth Clark published the results of the Doll Test, where Black children, between the ages of three and seven, were asked to order their preferences between four identical dolls that had different skin tones. Most of the Black children chose the white doll and attributed positive qualities to it.²⁶³

Karen Pyke characterizes internalized racism as the "individual inculcation of the racist stereotypes, values, images, and ideologies perpetuated by the White dominant society about one's own racial group, leading to feelings of self-doubt, disgust, and disrespect for one's race and/or oneself."²⁶⁴ We need only recall the oft-cited study of Claude Steele's work on stereotype threat to substantiate the claim that racial stereotyping also has repercussions to the internal workings of the individual subjected to it.²⁶⁵ Steele demonstrates that whenever individuals belonging to negatively stereotyped social groups are made aware or reminded of the stereotype, they have a tendency to underperform. When African Americans are reminded of the stereotype that they are not as academically gifted as white Americans, they perform worse than if they had not been reminded of the stereotype.

²⁶³ NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. (2019). *The Significance of "The Doll Test" | NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund*. [online] Available at: <http://www.naacpldf.org/brown-at-60-the-doll-test> [Accessed 15 Mar. 2019].

²⁶⁴ Pyke, K. (2010). What is Internalized Racial Oppression and Why Don't We Study It? Acknowledging Racism's Hidden Injuries. *Sociological Perspectives*, 53(4), pp.551-572.

²⁶⁵ Steele, C. (1997). A Threat in the Air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist*, 52(6), pp.613-629.

The phenomenon of internalized racism is particularly disturbing in the context of racialized conceptions of criminality. As Nanina Liebow argues, “internalized prejudices regarding criminality can cause people of color (men and women) to view themselves as outlaws in the moral community, that is, wrongdoers.”²⁶⁶ She argues that the internalization of racial criminality stereotypes leads to feelings of guilt, where such guilt is particularly harmful because there is no way to alleviate it. Comparing it to gender oppression, she notes that at least the “white housewife can gain a sense of moral competence and belonging within the moral community by submitting to her husband and by being an excellent homemaker,”²⁶⁷ whereas Black people have no way of gaining “a sense of moral competence or belonging within the moral community.”²⁶⁸

This excerpt from Liebow merits closer scrutiny. What she ought to say is that Black people in Western societies are ostracized from the *dominant* moral community. But that is not the only available option for them. One can become part of a deviant moral community that rejects the norms and moral values of society at large. Racial minorities, when welcomed into a deviant moral community, can find a sense of belonging. Gang membership is one possible example of this. If an individual is already paying the price of being a criminal in her or his everyday interactions, there is a sense in which it makes sense to choose the criminal path, even though this choice is a choice made under conditions of reduced moral agency. The stereotype of criminality, when internalized, can make this self-fulfilling. Ross Gay offers insight into what it is like to live and grapple with the stereotype of racial criminality:

I’ve been afraid walking through the alarm gate at the store that maybe something’s fallen into my pocket, or that I’ve unconsciously stuffed something in them; I’ve felt panic that the

²⁶⁶ Liebow, N. (2016). Internalized Oppression and Its Varied Moral Harms: Self-Perceptions of Reduced Agency and Criminality. *Hypatia*, 31(4), pp.713-729.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 723.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. 723.

light skinned man who mugged our elderly former neighbors was actually me, and I worried that my parents, with whom I watched the newscast, suspected the same; and nearly every time I've been pulled over, I've prayed that there were no drugs in my car, despite the fact that I don't use drugs; I don't even smoke pot. That's to say the story I have all my life heard about black people — criminal, criminal, criminal — I have started to suspect myself.²⁶⁹

4.2.2.3. The Psychological Harm of Poverty

In a study entitled “How Poverty Affects People’s Decision-making Processes,” Jennifer Sheehy-Skeffington and Jessica Rea find that “there is robust evidence that exposure to poverty or low [socio-economic] status while young is associated with poorer functioning on tasks measuring basic cognitive processes. In particular, the poorer one’s socioeconomic background, the worse one is likely to perform on measures of selective attention and inhibitory control, both of which are important for focusing on a goal and resisting distracting alternatives that might derail one from achieving it.”²⁷⁰ In short, being poor predisposes one to making bad decisions, especially bad financial decisions.²⁷¹ Poor people are “more likely to use expensive payday loans and check-cashing services, to play lotteries, and to borrow at high interest rates.”²⁷²

²⁶⁹ Ross Gay | *Some thoughts on mercy*. *The MOON magazine*. [online] Available at: <http://moonmagazine.org/ross-gay-some-thoughts-on-mercy-2013-09-29/2/> [Accessed 15 Mar. 2019].

²⁷⁰ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2017). *How Poverty Affects People’s Decision-making Processes*. [online] Available at: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/business-and-consultancy/consulting/assets/documents/how-poverty-affects-peoples-decision-making-processes.pdf> [Accessed 15 Mar. 2019].

²⁷¹ A quick google search of ‘poverty bad decisions’ results in dozens of news and academic journal articles explaining a correlation between poverty and bad financial decisions.

²⁷² Carvalho, L. (2016). Poverty and Decision-Making. [Blog] *The Evidence Base*. Available at: <http://evidencebase.usc.edu/poverty-and-decision-making/> [Accessed 15 Mar. 2019].

But just as there is rationality in women's and racial minorities' choices and preferences that are inimical to their interests, there are also rational explanations for many poor people's bad choices. In an autobiography entitled *Hand to Mouth: Living Bootstrap in America*, Linda Tirado chronicles her life as a low-wage worker and offers insight into why poor people make bad financial decisions. She writes:

I make a lot of poor financial decisions. None of them matter, in the long term. I will never not be poor, so what does it matter if I don't pay a thing and a half this week instead of just one thing? It's not like the sacrifice will result in improved circumstances; the thing holding me back isn't that I blow five bucks at Wendy's. It's that now that I have proven that I am a poor person that is all that I am or ever will be. It is not worth it to me to live a bleak life devoid of small pleasures so that one day I can make a single large purchase. I will never have large pleasures to hold on to. There's a certain pull to live what bits of life you can while there's money in your pocket, because no matter how responsible you are you will be broke in three days anyway.²⁷³

4.2.2.4. Oppression Undermines Agency

Living under domination and oppression can have harmful effects on a person's agency, which means that oppressed people's choices and preferences are neither good nor reliable guides to the betterment of their overall interests. Sometimes, interests and choices are in contradiction with each other, so we cannot use choice, understood as an agent's phenomenological set of options and preferences, as a criterion for arbitrariness. An interference is arbitrary whenever it does not track the choices (according to Pettit) of the person being interfered with. We ought to

²⁷³ Tirado, L. (2014) *Hand to Mouth: Living In Bootstrap America*. New York: Berkeley Books, p. xviii.

reject this view. In many cases of oppression and domination, the dominated and oppressed could be suffering from false consciousness or internalized oppression. A conception of domination that can only make sense of cases where agents' choices are being interfered with is unsatisfactory because it will invariably exclude cases of internalized oppression.

Here, we can return to the earlier points about the benefits of a subjective account of interests. The first claim is that freedom is increased whenever one's choices are increased. While, as has been argued, unfreedom in choices cannot be the basis for our conception of oppression, we must acknowledge that this idea can still be preserved in cases where there is no conflict between choices and interests. In fact, insofar as it is in the interests of people to have more choices and more freedom, it becomes a corollary of tracking someone's interests that their choices and freedoms are maximized.

The second claim is that paternalism is coextensive with domination. However, given the phenomenon of internalized oppression, we must distinguish between paternalism and domination.²⁷⁴ Whilst the experience of paternalism may involve psychological distress that we might find objectionable, the alternative – namely oppression – is even more unacceptable.

4.3. From Subjective Interests to Objective Interests

Oppression can be internalized. And, as many theorists of oppression indicate, human beings tend to form preferences that are constrained by unjust

²⁷⁴ In any case, Pettit's conception of paternalism is arguably in tension with his consequentialist conception of liberty and the republican state. Given that he argues that it is the responsibility of the republican state to maximize the freedoms of persons, he ought to have a corresponding consequentialist conception of paternalism. A consequentialist conception of paternalism judges an action as paternalistic whenever it benefits the agent who suffers the interference. If and whenever the psychological distress caused by the interference outweighs the benefits of the interference, such action ought to be construed as arbitrary. An intention to benefit is a necessary but insufficient criterion for paternalism. In order for an act to qualify as paternalistic, it has to actually benefit the person subjected to the interference.

normative frameworks. Given this, we would do well to replace Pettit's subjective conception of interests with an objective conception, where "objectivity" is, at this juncture in this dissertation, understood in a negative sense as simply not being subjective or not being entirely dependent on what people think is in their interests. Most oppression theorists, whether inadvertently or not, rely on a notion of objective interests simply because the alternative is unacceptable and because oppression often involves false consciousness.

It could be argued that an objective conception of interests that fails to account for the subjective assessments of the people or person whose interests is in question is just as implausible. In as much as we are interested in determining what is good or bad for people, surely, their assessments of their predicament (and their views more generally) should matter. As such, a purely objective conception of interests, where objectivity is understood as mind-independence, is an unpersuasive and ultimately unsatisfying account of interests.

Notice, however, that the word "entirely" plays a crucial role in understanding objective interests. When we say that objective interests cannot be entirely dependent on people's opinions and subjective assessments, we are not necessarily excluding subjective assessments altogether. It is quite likely, indeed, that any defensible conception of objective interests must at some level acknowledge the subjective assessments of people, that there must necessarily be an element of subjectivity that is partly constitutive of the overall objective conception of interests. Finally, it is important to state explicitly that the conception of objective interests that will be defended rejects the idea that objectivity implies mind independence. At this juncture, our conception of objectivity should be understood as a purely negative and non-substantive conception, a rejection of the purely subjectivist view that Pettit relies on. We will delve into the issue of how to understand objectivity in Chapter 6, The Epistemology of Oppression.

4.4. Summary of Domination and Internalized Oppression

We began this chapter with a discussion of Pettit's conception of freedom as non-domination and argued for its superiority over freedom as non-interference by pointing out that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with interference. In fact, interferences can be said to promote, create, or even constitute freedoms, and we used the example of traffic regulations to concretize this idea. We then assuaged the worry that Pettit's conception of freedom as non-domination might be too individualistic by rehearsing his argument that freedom as non-domination is necessarily a "communitarian good."

We then discussed why a subjective conception of interests is attributed to Pettit and why it is problematic for a theory of oppression by delving into the literature of internalized oppression. We surveyed Sandra Bartky's work on deformed desires, Nanina Liebow's problematic on "internalized prejudices regarding criminality," and we considered how poverty can lead people to make bad financial decisions that exacerbate their poverty. The literature on internalized oppression confirms our hypothesis that Pettit's subjective conception of interests is unacceptable because oppression undermines agency. Finally, I suggested replacing Pettit's subjective conception of interests with an objective notion, where "objectivity" does not mean mind-independence. Instead a non-substantive and purely negative conception of objective interests was adopted, where the notion of objectivity is understood simply as not being entirely dependent on agents' subjective assessments.

CHAPTER FIVE

From Domination to Oppression

5. Structural Domination

Now that we have sketched the parameters of Pettit's republican account of domination and argued that arbitrariness is best judged in relation to objective interests, we are primed for the task of converting domination to oppression. But before we proceed to that, it is worth digressing to discuss Alex Gourevitch's work analyzing 19th century labor republicans and the concept of structural domination.

One could object to the project of developing a republican univocal concept of oppression by pointing out that the concept of structural domination, as developed by labor republicans like Alex Gourevitch, already does the job or play the function that I want the concept of oppression to do or perform. Although labor republicans focus their attention and analyses on labor and "the unequal distribution of control over productive assets,"²⁷⁵ their idea of structural domination could be amended to capture many other intuitive instances of objectionable phenomena that are not based on one's economic predicament or control over production. The current account of structural domination could perhaps be easily amended to capture all the phenomena that I want the concept of oppression to capture.

Labor republicans argue that the republican conception of liberty can deliver us a "theory of not just personal but structural domination."²⁷⁶ A crucial feature of structural domination is the rejection of the neorepublican's commitment to the idea that interference is necessary for domination. As he argues, Gourevitch wants to "expand" the definition of domination to "include

²⁷⁵ Gourevitch, A., 2013. Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work. *Political Theory*, 41(4), p. 598.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 592.

other agents beyond personal masters.”²⁷⁷ He goes on to say that structural domination is a “concept that explains how unequal control over productive assets converts anonymous interdependence into domination of wage laborers, without this domination taking the form of personal subjection.”²⁷⁸ Gourevitch insists that he is “not claiming that a structure can have intentions or doing the dominating, but rather that there are dominating agents who dominate by creating certain structures through intentional actions.”²⁷⁹

What is most promising about Gourevitch’s proposal to “expand” the meaning of domination is that he wants to “show that the republican theory of freedom is more expansive and demanding than its most prominent defenders.”²⁸⁰ Pettit is among those that he identifies as its most prominent defenders. What lies behind the rationale for unearthing the concept of republican freedom used by “working class appropriators of republican ideals” is a defense of a more thoroughgoing and demanding conception of equality than Pettit and those that Gourevitch calls neorepublicans are willing to defend. He criticizes Pettit for acquiescing that the private property system is compatible with republican liberty. Labor republicans saw the dependence of wage-laborers as a form of wage-slavery because “despite their legal ownership of their bodies, the unequal control over productive assets forced those without such property to sell themselves to some employer or another.”²⁸¹ They demanded an egalitarian distribution of control over productive assets. He finds Pettit’s proposal for an unconditional basic income to be insufficient for the realization of republican liberty. He points out that Pettit makes “no argument for collective ownership of the means of production or democratic control over productive assets.”²⁸² This is perhaps why he says

²⁷⁷ Gourevitch, A., 2013. Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work. *Political Theory*, 41(4), p. 604.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 606

²⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 592

²⁸¹ Ibid., p. 596

²⁸² Ibid., p. 598

that there is a “strong connection between the republican conception of liberty and strands of socialist thought.”²⁸³

Whilst Gourevitch’s conceptions of freedom and equality are very enticing, there are at least three reasons why Gourevitch’s labor republican account of structural domination ought to be rejected in favor of a univocal concept of oppression. Firstly, Gourevitch rejects the idea that interference is necessary for domination. As such, he is amending the definition of domination and removing an element that plays a crucial role in Pettit’s account. However, he does not replace it with anything. In other words, he does not make clear what domination is. All he says is that interference is not necessary for domination because there is such a thing as structural domination. But given that it is no longer clear what he means by domination because he, in some sense, rejects Pettit’s construal of it, what then does he mean by structural domination? If “structural domination” is defined as domination without interference, and interference is not necessary for domination, what then is domination? Gourevitch’s account seems incomplete. He seems to be relying too much on the implicit normativity inherent in the concept of domination to sketch an idea of what structural domination is.

The closest that he seems to get at an explicit statement of what structural domination is is in his statement that “[s]tructural domination is an intermediate condition between personal subjection and anonymous interdependence.”²⁸⁴ While this gives us an idea of what structural domination is by making us imagine an “intermediate condition” between domination (personal subjection) and “anonymous interdependence,” it still fails at providing a precise understanding of the essence of the concept. Perhaps more accurately, he failed to construct an essence for the concept that he is defending.

²⁸³ Gourevitch, A., 2011. Labor and Republican Liberty. *Constellations*, 18(3), p. 445.

²⁸⁴ Gourevitch, A., 2013. Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work. *Political Theory*, 41(4), p. 604

We can observe the ambiguity at work in Gourevitch's conception of domination in his statement that "there are dominating agents who dominate by creating certain structures through intentional actions."²⁸⁵ In the language of the univocal republican concept of oppression that I am defending, this statement can be rephrased as: Agents can be held responsible for contributing to the creation or maintenance of social structures through their intentional or voluntary actions.

Unlike Gourevitch's formulation, which relies on an unclear concept of domination, where the unclarity is arguably of his own design, my own formulation is much clearer. Moreover, as I will later discuss in "Who are the oppressors?", human beings are born into social environments and into a hierarchical social world involuntarily. It seems unfair to call anyone who participates in the perpetuation of social structures a dominator (or an oppressor) when they are, practically speaking, unable to escape. Perhaps more importantly, it is important to maintain a morally motivated distinction between those who culpably commit acts of arbitrary interferences (dominators and oppressors) and those who are merely in a privileged position. We want to give the privileged an incentive to refrain from exercising their capacity for arbitrary interference, and one way to do that is to attempt to preserve the distinction between agents who are merely privileged but do not commit intentional acts of arbitrary interference and agents who exercise their capacity for arbitrary interference.

It may be said that my reading of Gourevitch is too uncharitable given that he did not explicitly embark on a project of conceptual clarification. Even though it is not possible to identify a statement that could count as an explanans for the concept of structural domination in his works, he in fact does a good job at *describing* what structural domination could be, especially in his point about how he characterizes "two kinds of dominating relationships." He

²⁸⁵ Gourevitch, A., 2013. Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work. *Political Theory*, 41(4), p. 606.

says that “One relation is the interpersonal one between master and slave. The other is the relation of the slave to the “many masters” (Roman citizens) who create and sustain the legal order.”²⁸⁶ So a plausible case could be made that I now ought to construct the essence of the concept of structural domination, using the very helpful resources that Gourevitch’s descriptive account provides. But there are two further reasons why a univocal concept of oppression is still better than developing a univocal concept of structural domination.

A second reason why the concept of oppression is better than the concept of structural domination pertains directly to one of the goals of this dissertation, which is to help bridge the gap between political philosophy and contemporary social movements or real-world politics more generally. As Haslanger points out, “the question of terminology is primarily a pragmatic and sometimes political one.”²⁸⁷ It makes so much more sense to use the concept of oppression. It is actually quite befuddling that Gourevitch wants to “expand” the meaning of domination when the concept of oppression is already available to him and is already widely used outside of academia. More to the point, the labor republicans that Gourevitch is drawing from to advance his conception of structural domination “were not, in the first instance, theoreticians”²⁸⁸ as he himself points out. He himself admits that “[t]o be sure, labor republicans did not frame their criticisms using the words ‘domination at work’ and ‘structural domination’.”²⁸⁹

In contrast, these people that Gourevitch identifies as labor republicans and whose writings he draws from in his quest to propagate the concept of structural domination actually already use the concept of oppression in their

²⁸⁶ Gourevitch, A., 2013. Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work. *Political Theory*, 41(4), p. 602.

²⁸⁷ Haslanger, S., 2012. Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?. In: H. Sally, ed., *Resisting Reality*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 225.

²⁸⁸ Gourevitch, A., 2013. Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work. *Political Theory*, 41(4), p. 598.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

written work. In fact, Gourevitch quotes from Henry Demarest Lloyd's famous work, *Wealth Against Commonwealth*, where Lloyd speaks of "the oppression of the cruel in their daily labor."²⁹⁰ Lloyd uses the term "oppression" almost a dozen times in this book.²⁹¹ Similarly, Terence Vincent Powderly, someone Gourevitch considered to be a "central figure"²⁹² in the labor republican's movement, in *Thirty Years of Labor*, uses the term "oppression" twenty-one times.²⁹³ George Edwin McNeill, "a labor editor, a leading member of the Knights [of Labor], active in Boston labor politics and author of one of that era's most influential account of the labor movement"²⁹⁴ entitled *The Labor Movement: The Problem of Today*, uses the term "oppression" thirty-one times in this piece of work.²⁹⁵ Eugene Debs, another labor republican that Gourevitch discusses, uses the term "oppression" ten times in his book *Labor and Freedom*.²⁹⁶ So it seems that the real question that needs asking is why Gourevitch is using the concept of structural domination when the very people or the political "actors" (as he put it) from whose works he is drawing from were actually and already using the concept of oppression?

My hypothesis is that he uses "structural domination" to make a direct connection with the neorepublican literature and Pettit's work specifically. But if so many, including Pettit himself, are already using "domination" and "oppression" interchangeably, it seems that the more important task for "theoreticians" is to clarify the distinction between the two, instead of creating

²⁹⁰ On p. 444 of Gourevitch, A., 2011. *Labor and Republican Liberty*. *Constellations*, 18(3), pp.431-454, Gourevitch quotes from p. 181 of Lloyd, H., 2005. *Wealth Against The Commonwealth*. New York and London: Harper and Brothers

²⁹¹ See pp. 116, 207, 230, 297, 342, 438, 492, 532, 547, and 548 of Lloyd, H., 2005. *Wealth Against The Commonwealth*. New York and London: Harper and Brothers.

²⁹² Gourevitch, A., 2015. *From Slavery to The Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty In The 19th Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 99.

²⁹³ See pp. 39, 65, 83, 87, 90, 112, 141, 171, 259, 341, 384, 394, 441, 483, 486, 499, 514, 538, 600, 672, and 693 of Powderly, T., 1889. *Thirty Years of Labor. 1859 To 1889*. Columbus, Ohio: Excelsoir Publishing House. P.

²⁹⁴ Gourevitch, A., 2015. *From Slavery to The Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty In The 19th Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 99.

²⁹⁵ See pp. 16, 20, 70, 72, 74, 76, 83, 95, 102, 107, 113, 169, 171, 257, 285, 286, 304, 337, 340 and 585 of McNeill, G., 2006. *The Labor Movement: The Problem ff Today*. Boston: Adamant Media Corporation.

²⁹⁶ See pp. 16, 18, 20, 26, 39, 40, 79, 98, and 102 of Debs, E., 2014. *Labor And Freedom*. Unknown: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

a further category or third concept. Instead of climbing further up the ivory tower to distinguish the concept of domination from the concept of structural domination, we ought really to return to the ground of empirical, political reality. And if we do that, we can empirically observe that political actors and activists, as far back as the labor republicans in the US to present day #MeToo militants and Black Lives Matters protestors are already using “oppression.”

Oppression is a term that is already being used by political activists and is prevalent in media articles, so targeting the concept of oppression for analysis is conducive to bridging this gap between political philosophy and political actors. Moreover, it is a term that was actually used by the labor republicans from which Gourevitch is trying to construct a republican conception of structural domination. The concept of “structural domination,” on the other hand, has remained somewhat confined to academia. As David Chalmers notes, “new [terms or concepts] are expensive and harder to get people to use.”²⁹⁷ If we want political philosophy to be connected with political realities on the ground, the onus is upon philosophers to use language and concepts that are already familiar to non-philosophers. If political philosophers want to be relevant to political activists, then philosophers must be willing to provide conceptual legitimacy and clarity to everyday political concepts utilized in social movements. In Gourevitch’s haste to directly connect the labor republicans’ conception of freedom to Pettit’s concept of domination by using the concept of “structural domination,” he missed the fact that labor republicans were actually already talking about oppression and not domination.

Finally, Gourevitch’s requirement that there are “reasonable alternatives” in order for agents to qualify as oppressed or structurally dominated can, in certain cases, be too demanding as a criterion for oppression. Much of what motivates Gourevitch’s analysis of why workers are

²⁹⁷ Chalmers, D. 2020. What is Conceptual Engineering and What Should It Be? *Inquiry*, forthcoming.

structurally dominated is the thought that there is an “absence of reasonable alternatives to selling one’s labor that guarantees propertyless workers have to sell their labor to some employer or another.”²⁹⁸ His account of structural domination, then, is heavily reliant on this notion of “reasonable alternatives.” Whilst the notion of “reasonable alternatives” seems to work for the case of dependent wage-workers, who really have no other reasonable alternative but to sell their labor, this is not obviously true for other forms of oppression.

This “reasonable alternative” requirement has the potential of excluding forms of oppression that are not rooted in economics, especially when we consider the phenomenon of internalized oppression. When agents internalize their subordinated status, they often choose what could be construed as “reasonable alternatives” even when they have other, arguably better options. In *Taking the Self Out of Self-Rule*, Michael Garnett argues that “victims of ideological domination, such as a woman who has been taught to place the needs of men always above her own”²⁹⁹ could still be regarded as self-ruling even though their agency is compromised. What he means is that even deferential wives, for instance, could have authentic desires to please their husbands. If we stipulate that, in this case that we are considering, there would be no penalties to her if she were not deferential, then we have a case where a woman has the “reasonable alternative” to not be deferential to her husband, and yet she genuinely chooses to subjugate her interests and desires to the interests and desires of her husband. This woman also has the “reasonable alternative” to leave her husband, so does it mean that she is not oppressed or structurally dominated? How would the “reasonable alternative” requirement work for the case of deferential wives and other cases of internalized oppression? It seems like applying the no “reasonable alternative” lens on some cases that we intuitively call oppression would mean that

²⁹⁸ Gourevitch, A., 2013. Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work. *Political Theory*, 41(4), p. 602.

²⁹⁹ Garnett, M., 2011. Taking the Self out of Self-Rule. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 16(1), p. 27.

Gourevitch's account of structural domination would fail to be inclusive to at least some non-economic forms of oppression.

Though Gourevitch problematizes the condition of “marginal groups – women, blacks, unskilled and immigrant workers”,³⁰⁰ it is not clear that his “reasonable alternative” requirement gives the result that they are structurally dominated or oppressed. Would Gourevitch agree that women are oppressed or structurally dominated by men in patriarchal societies? Would Gourevitch agree that non-whites are oppressed or structurally dominated by whites in societies marked by white supremacy? Would Gourevitch agree that homosexuals and those who do not conform to gender norms are oppressed or structurally dominated by heterosexuals and heteronormativity? Don't immigrants have, as some anti-immigrants insist, the “reasonable alternative” to go home to escape discrimination in First World societies? Imagine a religious conservative reading Gourevitch's account of structural domination. This hypothetical religious conservative could argue that homosexuals are not oppressed or structurally dominated by heterosexuals or practices of heteronormativity simply because homosexuals still have the “reasonable alternative” to choose heterosexuality. Or what about a woman who complains of sexual harassment in the workplace? Someone could say to her that she has the “reasonable alternative” to find a husband who will financially support her so that she does not need to be sexually harassed at work.

What a “reasonable alternative” is is an extremely contentious and politicized matter, especially in situations of hierarchies and oppression. At best, it varies from individual to individual or from one ideological standpoint to another. At worst, “reasonableness” can be used as a tool to reinforce existing hierarchies and to fortify hegemonies.³⁰¹ This is partly why Simon

³⁰⁰ Gourevitch, A., 2015. *From Slavery To The Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor And Republican Liberty In The 19th Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 172.

³⁰¹ Finlayson, L., 2015. *The Political Is Political: Conformity and The Illusion of Dissent In Contemporary Political Philosophy*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International pp. 41-85 and Srinivasan, A., 2017. The Aptness of Anger. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 26(2), pp.123-144.

Caney and Gerald Gaus, in assessing the “reasonableness” requirement in John Rawls’ political liberalism, argue that this notion of “reasonableness” must be abandoned.³⁰² More often than not, what is “reasonable” is dependent on and determined by the context or the status quo. This is particularly problematic if the goal is to eradicate systemic and normalized injustices, which is often the case for some of the most perverse and prevalent forms of oppression. Whilst rationality is (or ought to be) a tool used by everyone regardless of political persuasion, the notion of “reasonableness” can easily be employed by reactionary protectors of the status quo. As such, whilst indeed illuminating for the specific injustice that workers suffer, it is not a particularly helpful component of a criterion that is supposed to play the function of advancing the interests of the disempowered. Having now argued that the concept of structural domination ought to be replaced with the concept of oppression, we are ready to convert domination to oppression.

5.1. Converting Domination to Oppression

I shall now demonstrate that there is no insurmountable obstacle in transforming Pettit’s account into a theory of oppression. If domination describes a scenario concerning two agents, where Agent A has the capacity to arbitrarily interfere with Agent B, we can convert this account into one of oppression by turning it into a collective phenomenon.

We incorporate the collective or group aspect of oppression by introducing the notion of a social group. However, we cannot simply replace the word “agent” with “social group,” since the social group here is not necessarily an agent.³⁰³ There are group agents – corporations, states, monarchs, organizations – and some philosophers, including Pettit himself, have argued persuasively for the possibility of group agents.³⁰⁴ We could make

³⁰² Caney, S., 1995. Anti-Perfectionism and Rawlsian Liberalism. *Political Studies*, 43(2), pp.248-264 and Gaus, G., 1996. *Justificatory Liberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

³⁰³ I thank Michal Garnett for this point.

³⁰⁴ List, C. and Pettit, P. (2013). *Group Agency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

a case for such agents as having the capacity to interfere or suffer interference because such capacities require agency. Insofar as groups can be agents, it is uncontroversial to claim that group agents can have such capacities.

Here, however, whilst we do not want to exclude group agents, it is important that we are able to include an aggregate of agents who do not form a group agent. Therefore, they cannot have a capacity to interfere or be interfered with, since, as we have stipulated, such a capacity requires group agency. Take, for example, the social group of men. Feminists contend that men oppress women. But “men” is a collection of agents that do not form a group agent. In *Group Agency*, Pettit and Christian List stipulate that a capacity for rational deliberation and intentional action are necessary for agency.³⁰⁵ A loose collection of individual agents cannot qualify as a group agent. Though individual men, barring some agential malfunctions, are capable of rational deliberation and intentional action, the loose collection of individuals that constitute the social group “men” do not have such capacities. If oppression requires the capacity for arbitrary interference, how could a disorganized collection of individuals be said to have such a capacity? The kind of social group we are referring to is reducible to the individuals that make up the group. They do not meet even the most minimal requirements for collective agency.

It now appears that we cannot easily give up the individualistic aspect of Pettit’s conception. Only agents – least controversially, individuals – can have the capacity to interfere and/or suffer interferences. So how do we reformulate Pettit’s conception of domination into a collective account of oppression given that we cannot simply replace the word “agent” with “social group”? We invoke a reciprocal relationship between the individual and her group membership. We say that an oppressive state of affairs obtains if and only if Agent A, *qua* member of Group A, has the capacity to arbitrarily interfere

³⁰⁵ List, C. and Pettit, P. (2013). *Group Agency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 20.

with Agent B, *qua* member of Group B. This means that individual agents in Group A must have the capacity to interfere with agents in Group B, by virtue of their membership in their respective social groups.

If, as Pettit argues, our institutional arrangements indeed constitute freedom, then we could make the same case for oppression. Using the same reasoning, we can say that institutions that inhibit people's freedom *constitute* oppression and do not merely cause it. People are free or oppressed because of the way that society is arranged. Freedom and oppression inhere in our relationships with others and the arrangement of social institutions. Putting it this way captures the institutional dimension and the collective aspect of oppression. We shall, henceforth, refer to this definition as the republican concept of oppression or our new concept of oppression.

5.2. Arbitrary Interference: Exercise or Capacity?

I previously mentioned Marilyn Friedman's objection against Pettit's subjective account of interests, now we turn to a second one. Friedman is not convinced that the mere capacity for arbitrary interference should be considered as inherently problematic. She argues that "arbitrary interference is always *prima facie* problematic; the mere capacity for it not so."³⁰⁶ Friedman motivates her objection by drawing attention to the idea a caretaker. Caretakers must be "able to respond to at least some range of unpredictable contingencies with behavior that benefits the one for whom she cares."³⁰⁷ She draws an analogy between the capacity to interfere arbitrarily (or to harm) and the capacity to benefit, and she argues that caretakers have the capacity to interfere arbitrarily but that the privilege of caretakers is not something that must automatically be construed as warranting a bad assessment.

³⁰⁶ Friedman, M. (2008). Pettit's Civic Republicanism and Male Domination. In: C. Laborde and J. Maynor, ed., *Republicanism and Political Theory*, 1st ed. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, p. 246.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

Under Pettit's conception of domination, good caretakers, who may be actively benefitting the people for whom they care, are dominators. Against Friedman, one could argue, that if the interference tracks the wellbeing of the person being interfered with, then it is *not* domination in Pettit's sense. But this objection misses the point: Friedman is highlighting that in order to be genuinely problematic, the capacity for arbitrary interference must be exercised. Caretakers, when they interfere to benefit the people they care for, also have the capacity to interfere to cause harm. As Friedman notes, the "capacity to help another person in an indeterminate variety of ways is also a capacity to act in ways that harm another person."³⁰⁸ The point is that we ought to be stricter in our requirements for domination since we do not want to remove the option for people to benefit others, and the capacity to benefit others usually comes with the power to harm as well.

Let us say that Group A oppresses Group B when agents in Group A, by virtue of their group membership, have the capacity to arbitrarily interfere with members of Group B, by virtue of their belonging to Group B – what does this do to our theory of oppression? In order to determine whether mere capacity or the exercise of such capacity is best suited to our purposes, let us imagine how each conception pans out when we try to apply it.

There is a curious old English law, which states that it is not illegal for an Englishman to kill a Scotsman within the ancient city walls of York if the Scotsman is holding a bow and arrow.³⁰⁹ This law is particularly interesting because the state explicitly creates the Englishman's capacity to arbitrarily interfere with a Scotsman. So here we have two social groups, Englishmen and Scotsmen, and a law permitting severe harm of one person to another, by virtue of their respective group memberships. But since no one ever exercises this capacity for arbitrary harm, it is difficult to say that this particular law

³⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 253.

³⁰⁹ Wainwright, M. (2007). You can still kill a Scotsman in York, but don't eat a mince pie at Christmas. *The Guardian*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2007/nov/07/uk.queensspeech20072> [Accessed 15 Aug. 2019].

makes it possible for Englishmen to oppress Scotsmen. This is not to say that there could be other ways for making a case that the English oppress the Scots, but it is difficult to make a convincing case that *this law* is a source of oppression for the Scots. Hence, it looks like Friedman is right when she says that the mere capacity or opportunity for arbitrary interference is not, by itself, objectionable.

Does this mean that the actual exercise of the capacity for arbitrary interference is required in order to count as oppression? Not necessarily. Even if Friedman is correct that domination cannot occur unless the capacity is exercised and actually results in harm, this does not automatically mean the same would be true for this theory of oppression. A crucial difference between Pettit's theory of domination and the account of oppression being defended here is that oppression is essentially a group-based phenomenon. However, it has already been noted that – given the type of social group that we have in mind – they cannot have the capacity to interfere or suffer interference. Hence, a dialectical relationship was invoked between the group and the individual members: it must be individuals who have the capacity to interfere and the possibility to be interfered with, by virtue of their respective group memberships.

This formulation makes our conception less vulnerable to the objections of methodological individualists. But because, in the Scotsman case, it is difficult to insist that oppression occurs when no one exercises the capacity to harm, it is tempting to say that oppression (like the conception of domination Friedman defended) requires the exercise of the capacity for arbitrary influence. However, the essentially collective feature of oppression, which is absent in domination, allows us to reject this dichotomy. For in saying that the capacity to interfere must be exercised, it does not follow that each and every single member of the privileged group exercises her or his power. So long as the capacity to interfere exists and some agents actually exercise such capacity, then we can consider a group oppressed. Returning to the Scotsman

case, even if not every Englishman exercises their capacity, if and only if there is or are Englishmen that kill Scots within the ancient city without penalty, then this suffices for oppression.

The social group feature of oppression allows us to straddle the divide between those, like Pettit, who think mere capacity is sufficient and those, like Friedman, who think that harm needs to occur in order for a relationship to be objectionable. This licenses an amendment to our previous definition: Group A oppresses Group B if and only if individual agents in Group A have a capacity to arbitrarily interfere with the agents in Group B, by virtue of their respective group memberships, and one or more agents in Group A actually exercise the capacity, which results in harm in some individuals in Group B.

This idea seems intuitively plausible. It is hard to say that the Scots are oppressed because of the existence of this particular law if no one suffers any harm because of it. But once a Scottish death with impunity occurs, we can point to this law as oppressive. Additionally, this way of dealing with Friedman's objection finds further support in dictionary-based conceptions of domination and oppression. The Merriam-Webster dictionary has three definitions for domination:

1. supremacy or preeminence over another
2. exercise of preeminence over another
3. exercise of preponderant, governing, or controlling influence³¹⁰

The same dictionary has two definitions for oppression:

1. unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power
2. a sense of being weighed down in body or mind³¹¹

³¹⁰ Domination. (n.d.) In Merriam-webster.com. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/domination> on 9 April 2019.

³¹¹ Oppression. (n.d.) In Merriam-webster.com. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/oppression> on 9 April 2019.

For our purposes, the first two definitions of domination and the first definition of oppression are relevant. According to this commonsensical definition, Pettit's conception of domination as a capacity is acceptable because it accords with the first dictionary formulation, which is supremacy or preeminence over another. Such supremacy or preeminence need not be enacted and does not require an action. It describes a state of being and is consistent with Pettit's view that domination is a capacity that does not require action. It also supports Friedman's conception because the second and third formulations maintain that domination could be an exercise. So, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, domination could refer to either a state or capacity and an exercise.

However, the dictionary definition has a stricter conception of oppression in that it does not allow us to conceive of oppression as a state or capacity. Oppression requires an "exercise of unjust or cruel power." This definition does not support a conception of oppression as mere capacity – it requires the exercise of the unjust power or capacity. If we were to impose Pettit's conception of domination as a capacity on our new concept of oppression, it would have no corroboration from this dictionary-based definition.

5.3. Threshold as An Exclusionary Mechanism

We now turn to an obvious problem in our new account of oppression. If oppression is used to designate a relationship between two social groups, where members of one group, Group A, have the capacity to interfere arbitrarily over members of another group, Group B, and some agents in Group A exercise the capacity, which results in harm in some agents in Group B, how do we exclude cases that satisfy these conditions but violate our intuitions about what oppression is?³¹²

³¹² I thank Michael Garnett for this objection.

Take the case of two groups of people leaving a sporting event, Group A and Group B. The people in Group A are friends; the people in Group B are friends. Group A is bigger than Group B, so it looks as if Group A can injure the people in Group B should there ever be a physical fight. One person from Group A starts hurling insults at some people in Group B. Such insults and display of collective force causes some members of Group B to experience psychological distress.³¹³ Such psychological distress can be construed as a form of harm.

Everything in this scenario could be made to fit into our concept of oppression, but, intuitively, it feels odd to say that Group A oppresses Group B. So, whilst there may be scenarios that satisfy the conditions of our new concept, it will not always be appropriate to designate them as oppression. The scenario above is better described as bullying since the number of people affected and the extent of the harm is not significant enough to warrant the label of “oppression.” The severity of the harms involved and the number of people affected are relevant considerations for calling something an instance of oppression. Barring any correlation between institutional forms of harm and the nature of the insults being hurled, it is more appropriate to call the case above an instance of bullying. Not all cases of shared group harm qualify as an instance of oppression because oppression requires that a certain threshold is met.

On the other hand, if the insults being hurled are racist, then the issue requires a wider scope of analysis. Racist insults can be construed as oppressive because the relevant social groups are now wider: the issue has ceased to be a localized and isolated case involving just the random two groups of friends. The racist comments are made under conditions of racial injustice in the wider society, and the systemic character of racist attitudes in this society need to become part of the analysis. The racist insults should be

³¹³ I thank Michael Garnett for this example.

understood as symptoms of a larger societal problem of racial inequality and oppression. The targets of the insult are not victimized only by racist insults but by other practices that are imposed on them for being non-white. As such, the notion of a threshold acts as an exclusionary mechanism, rendering some counter-intuitive uses of the concept unacceptable. The threshold allows us to exclude counter-intuitive cases that satisfy the requirements of the original formulation.

5.4. Concept Defined

We are now in a position to state our new republican concept of oppression. Oppression refers to an injustice in our social arrangements. Group A oppresses Group B, whenever Agent A has the capacity to arbitrarily interfere with Agent B, by virtue of their respective group memberships, and some agents in Group A exercise the capacity, which results in harm in some members of Group B. However, not all cases that satisfy the description above count as oppression because the concept of oppression requires a certain threshold of harm is met.

5.4.1. Components of the Formulation

5.4.1.1. Arbitrary Interference

Uncontroversial instances of interference involve an agent performing an action that affects another agent. Whenever an agent performs an action that results in harm or a reduction in one's wellbeing, this is clearly an interference. If a person suffers physical harm due to gender, sexual orientation, gender presentation, disability, skin color, economic class, or other arbitrary feature or characteristic, they are a victim of an arbitrary interference. Interference seems to require some form of action – and in paradigm cases of arbitrary interference, overt actions are probably easily identifiable. It is, however, worth noting that there is some unclarity about what counts as an action and what counts as an inaction, as the large literature on the Doctrine

of Double Effect³¹⁴ and Doing Versus Allowing³¹⁵ demonstrates. What this means is that even if we require that interference always involves action, there is no clear way to disambiguate between action and inaction, and this may potentially be a good thing for it may allow an expansive set of actions and inactions to count as oppressive.

Moreover, if, as Pettit stipulated, an “arbitrary interference” is an intentional action that is “not forced to track the interests of,”³¹⁶ there could be much leeway on what qualifies as an arbitrary interference. This might allow a more inclusive conception of “arbitrary interference.” Take, for example, the case of the physically handicapped. The construction and maintenance of roads and buildings that are not wheelchair-friendly could be construed as arbitrary interferences since the interests of the physically handicapped are not taken sufficiently into account. As such, there is a sense in which every intentional or voluntary action *could* count as an interference with X if it fails to sufficiently take into account X’s objective interests.

It must be acknowledged that this is a non-standard conception of what an interference is, which relies on or assumes a very demanding conception of morality. We will begin with the issue of a demanding morality before going on to tackle the problem of the controversial use of “interference.” Given that we live in societies of extreme inequalities, the concept of oppression functions as a way to criticize hierarchies and inequalities. Hierarchies are abundant, and one way in which we can attempt to equalize individuals is through the use of the concept of oppression, which is a judgment of injustice. The drive towards achieving substantive (and not merely formal) equality means that there is sometimes a practical need to level-down for the sake of

³¹⁴ McIntyre, A. “Doctrine of Double Effect”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL =

<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/double-effect/>>

³¹⁵ Woollard, Fiona and Howard-Snyder, Frances, "Doing vs. Allowing Harm", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL =

<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/doing-allowing/>>

³¹⁶ Pettit, P., 2010. *Republicanism*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, p. 272.

equality. It may require the sacrifice of some productivity and act as a constraint on the pursuit of excellence, insofar as some individuals are excluded from productive activity and from attaining excellence in certain domains. As Gourevitch states, “inequality subvert[s] the formal independence of citizens.”³¹⁷ Capitalism and capitalist competition have a tendency to “fly with the fastest” and to leave behind those who are not competitive or whose skills or ways of being are not conducive to maximizing a particular conception of what constitutes advancement or human flourishing.

Now, to return to the issue of the non-standard use of “interference.” One could say that the suggestion to construe the construction of wheelchair inaccessible roads and buildings as acts of arbitrary interferences is an extremely counter-intuitive use of the notion of arbitrary interferences. This is likely the reason why Gourevitch decided to drop the notion of interference in his account of structural domination. Still, there are resources in Gourevitch’s conception of structural domination that attempt to supply an affirmative answer to the question of whether building a non-wheelchair friendly edifice is oppressive.

In a similar way that ordinary, non-slave-owning Romans could be faulted for “knowingly (or foreseeably) maintain[ing] the law and institution of slavery,”³¹⁸ so did the builders knowingly or foreseeably create an edifice which upholds the practice of excluding people with physical disabilities. It is uncontroversial to claim that it is unjust to exclude people from equal participation in society (of which buildings are a part of) based on morally arbitrary aspects about them. So, it makes sense to also claim that when the builders erected a non-wheelchair-friendly edifice, they participated in the unjust practice of knowingly or foreseeably excluding certain individuals with disabilities. If, as Pettit insists, “interference” has an intentionality requirement,

³¹⁷ Gourevitch, A., 2015. *From Slavery To The Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor And Republican Liberty In The 19th Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 104

³¹⁸ Gourevitch, A., 2013. Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work. *Political Theory*, 41(4), p. 601.

then foresight is a weak form of intentionality but is a type of intentionality nonetheless. Both H.L.A. Hart³¹⁹ and Henry Sidgwick³²⁰ argue that mere foresight of a probable consequence of one's action is enough to count that as a consequence of one's intention. As such, they foresaw or should have foreseen that their voluntary actions are excluding others, which, in the language of republicanism, is an act of arbitrary interference.

It is thus possible to build on Gourevitch's arguments. But instead of abandoning the notion of interference, following Pettit, I am choosing to attempt to expand it to include any intentional or voluntary action that does not sufficiently take the interests of everyone, especially the disempowered, into account. Since Pettit and other neorepublicans are already using "interference" to describe a broad range of cases – cases wherein we would not normally use "interference" – in their effort to encourage and disseminate the use of republican language, I could take a similar route.³²¹ Recognizing that terms, words, concepts, and their associated meanings tend to evolve over time, this may not be a completely unpromising strategy and is consistent with at least some neorepublican uses of "interference."

If Gourevitch is already arguing that ordinary Roman citizens, even those who did not own slaves, dominated slaves by their mere participation in a society that had slavery, then I might also be able to say that the builders oppressed individuals with physical disabilities because they "knowingly (or foreseeably)" marginalized and (invoking one of Young's *Five Faces*) oppressed, through their intentional or voluntary actions, people with disabilities. It is also uncontroversial to say that the builders did not track or sufficiently take into account the interests of those with physical disabilities. The controversy really only begins when we revert to the republican language

³¹⁹ Hart, H.L.A. 1982 (1968). *Punishment and Responsibility*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 119.

³²⁰ Sidgwick, H. 1981. *The Methods of Ethics*. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., p. 202.

³²¹ On p. 10 of Pettit, P., 2012. *On The People's Terms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, he says "there is no law without interference," and by "interference" he seems to mean "coercion."

in the univocal criteria, which state that oppression involves arbitrary interference.

Because Pettit defended a technical specification that “arbitrary interference” means “not forced to track the interests of,” why does the substitution fail to be convincing? What is happening here is that I am trying to redescribe the condition (not the experience) of wheelchair-bound individuals in the language of republicanism, aided by Pettit’s technical specification of what an arbitrary interference is. To attempt to redescribe an action using other words or in another language is called the *accordion effect* – it is a feature of language which allows us to describe an action or event in numerous ways.³²² But here the situation is that the substitution using the republican language makes the formerly uncontroversial claim sound bizarre. This, I am afraid, is a limitation of the republican language – a language inspired by ancient slavery – to fully accommodate our current *intuitions* about what contemporary oppression involves or consists of.

Our intuitions about oppression are shaped by people’s experiences of it because oppression has a subjective component. Given that people have different beliefs and values, vocabularies and experiences, we cannot capture the various subjective *experiences* of oppression in a univocal criterion. But the main focus of this thesis is to capture the objective aspect or condition of oppression, and my conversion of Pettit’s theory of domination to a univocal criterion for oppression states that shared liability to arbitrary interferences is the shared *condition* of the dominated and oppressed.

For clarity, any voluntary action could count as an arbitrary interference insofar as any individual could claim that such an act does not track her objective interests. If someone thinks an institutionally sourced intentional or voluntary action is wrong because she rightly believes that it fails to take her and her social group’s objective interests into account, then that wrongful

³²² Searle, J. (2010). *Making the Social World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 2.

intentional action, in the language of republicanism, is an act of arbitrary interference.

Whilst it may be ideal to be able to come up with a criterion for what sorts of actions (or inactions) should count as arbitrary interferences, diverse ideological frameworks mean that what is an arbitrary interference for some may not be considered an arbitrary interference by others. For instance, given my moral and political commitments, I consider the eviction of a non-paying tenant to be an arbitrary interference. But a person who believes in the value of defending private property and property rights would disagree with me. Nathaniel Coleman argues that a white person who exclusively associates with other white people is racist because he believes that there is a duty to encounter people “racialized as black.”³²³ A believer and defender of freedom of association would fail to see a wrong in that.

As such, the goal of constructing or conceptually engineering a univocal criterion for oppression means that any such criterion endangers the inclusivity required of a univocal criterion. In other words, no one can be in a position to conclusively say which actions or inactions count as interferences because we cannot anticipate in advance the various and potentially conflicting ways in which people conceive of what tracking their interests consists of. Moreover, any attempt at an exhaustive list or a definitive criterion for what ought to count as arbitrary interference fails to appreciate the dynamicity of interests. Given that I already committed to using the framework and language of republicanism, I will just have to be at peace with the position that any intentional or voluntary action of a member of a privileged group that does not sufficiently take into account the interests of all those affected by the action is a *prima facie* arbitrary interference.

³²³ Coleman, N. (2013). *The Duty to Miscegenate*. PhD. The University of Michigan.

5.4.1.1.1. Why not “power”?

One could say that a criterion that requires interferences to be identifiable may simply be too restrictive and exclusionary to some cases that some would intuitively like to label as oppression. So perhaps I ought to follow Gourevitch’s lead and drop the interference requirement. I could avoid all the problems associated with relying on the notion of interference by simply substituting “interference” with “power.” Maybe the notion of power is more suited for capturing the ingredients involved in the phenomenon under investigation.

In fact, Steven Lukes’ account of the third dimension of power would work very well in capturing injustices where we struggle to identify actions of behavior that could count as an interference in more standard understandings of “interference.” According to Lukes, power is most effective when it is least observable, when the oppressed acquiesce to their own oppression.³²⁴ Moreover, using “power” would be more synchronized with the resultant analysis from Young’s *Five Faces*, since I argued that oppressed peoples share a condition of powerlessness.

Given that I and other neorepublicans are stretching the meaning of “interference,” adopting “power” will save me from having to rely too much on a non-standard and potentially controversial understanding of “interference.” It is true that in merely replacing “interference” with “power,” I could avoid a lot of the problems that the notion of interference brings, so I am perfectly happy if others prefer to use “power” instead of “interference.” There are clear advantages to using the notion of power, and the substitution is straightforward and relatively unproblematic. Having said that, I can offer two reasons for why there are certain specific reasons for retaining the republican language of “interference.”

³²⁴ Lukes, S., 2009. *Power: A Radical View*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

A first reason why “interference” is better than “power” relates to empirical verifiability or operationalization. One reason why the concept of oppression ought to be stabilized is that it is a precondition for the empirical verifiability of claims of oppression. The statement “X is in poverty” is an empirically verifiable claim, in part because the World Bank has designated precisely what poverty means. People may feel poor, but unless they actually fall below an official poverty line threshold, they cannot count as impoverished. The notion of interference is more amenable to empirical observation, whereas the notion of power seems less so. “Interference” encourages us to think in empirical terms or observable behavior. The notion of interference requires us to think creatively about how to frame the injustice we perceive in a language that is amenable to empirical verification. If we characterize oppression to describe a scenario, where members of a group are subjected to the arbitrary power of the members of another group, we will have to embark on another project of disambiguating the concept of power. But if we say that oppression occurs whenever agents in a group are liable to the arbitrary interference of agents in another group, we are being primed to think about observable behavior. If there is no overt, observable behavior that we can point to as an arbitrary interference, we can make a case for why certain actions should be described as arbitrary interferences. Although replacing “arbitrary interference” with “arbitrary power” may allow us to have a more inclusive conception of oppression because the concept of power is more indeterminate, I worry that such indeterminacy will cripple the project of ever being able to operationalize claims of oppression.

Against logical positivists and those that they have influenced, I want to make it a fact that Hitler was an oppressor. And so, the elements of the characterization offered must be conducive for its operationalization. Daniel McDermott argued that political philosophy and the social sciences must be complementary. He says “[w]hereas social scientists aim to determine the empirical facts about human behavior and institutions, political philosophers

aim to determine what *ought* to be done in light of that information.”³²⁵ My idea is that this is not the only way in which political philosophy can complement the social sciences. Political philosophers can also clarify and distill concepts so that they are more readily available for empirical use, in a similar way that the concept of sexual harassment has been operationalized.

Secondly, recall that one of the goals of this project is to dispel the pervasive myth that oppression could occur even if no wrong action can be identified. If we cannot identify wrong or harmful actions, this means that we are not talking about an injustice. It means we are not yet ready to call it an injustice. Sometimes, people are systemically disadvantaged in such a way that their disadvantage is unavoidable or at least not currently solvable. In cases of mere systemic disadvantage, there may be no injustice, so it may not be necessary to identify observable behaviors to justify a claim about systemic disadvantage.³²⁶ But if there is knowledge of an injustice, and people do nothing to alleviate it, all their actions that ignore or allow the injustice to persist ought to be construed as *prima facie* arbitrary interferences. All who contribute to the perpetuation of unjust social institutions and practices ought to be construed as agents responsible for oppression. So, whilst replacing “interference” with “power” is acceptable and consistent with the general spirit of this project, there are certain advantages to retaining and, in effect, expanding the way we understand what an “interference” is.

5.4.1.2. What counts as harm?

Oppression is essentially about group harm. A group is harmed whenever individuals in the group suffer harm. Many forms of harm are uncontroversial. Few would contest the claim that suffering arbitrary physical

³²⁵ McDermott, D., 2008. Analytical Political Philosophy. In: D. Leopold and M. Stears, ed., *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.11-28.

³²⁶ For a thoroughgoing egalitarian, all systemic disadvantages are in principle avoidable, so they always evolve into an injustice once there is knowledge of the disadvantage. But for the purposes of this thesis, I shall retain a distinction between systemic disadvantage and oppression.

harm is wrong or — if the harm is shared among members of a social group — unjust or oppressive. If some human beings are targets of arbitrary physical harm because of gender, race, socioeconomic class or sexual orientation, it should be uncontroversial that this is wrong. However, claims of oppression are sometimes made even when harms are not particularly obvious. The main reason for this is because different individuals have different understandings of interests. More precisely, how we understand what is in our interests is often strongly influenced by our moral and political commitments.

Whilst for some people being subjected to microaggressions constitutes a form of harm, others may disagree. For Clare Chambers, women who undergo cosmetic breast surgery harm themselves, but some women think that, overall, the breast surgery is a benefit. Whenever individuals disagree about whether a particular scenario or description of a situation qualifies as an instance of oppression, the disagreement is not usually about what oppression is or what it means; the disagreement is usually moral or political. The main reason for this is because different individuals have different understandings of interests.

Harm is a nebulous concept, and to offer a fully defensible elucidation of what is harm is an extremely demanding project that is beyond the scope of this thesis. On the most basic level, I am adopting a broad conception of harm as any setback to one's (objective) interests. The other components in the criterion function as exclusionary mechanisms to prevent this univocal concept of oppression from being too overly inclusive. Recognizing the plurality of the available conceptions of interests means that what might be a justified claim of oppression from one particular moral or political perspective may be rejected by another that does not subscribe to a similar moral or political ideology. As much as I would like my own conception of interests to triumph, my primary motivation of providing a non-exclusionary, univocal ontological criterion for oppression means that I cannot exclude others who

subscribe to moral and political ideologies that I reject from using the concept accurately.

The defended account of oppression here is able to accommodate any understanding of harm, regardless of what one's political agenda or moral motivations are. The philosophical project of asking what oppression is or what the essence of the concept of oppression is can be separated from the question of whose conception of harm and interests ought to prevail.³²⁷ Any harm that a group of individuals suffer that meets a certain contextually-defined threshold qualifies as oppression if all other conditions within the univocal criterion are satisfied. Given the explicit recognition that there is a plurality in the available conceptions of interests and the need for a non-exclusionary univocal criterion, perhaps the account being defended could become liable to a similar objection that I launched against Haslanger's concept of oppression.

Recall that one of the problems with Haslanger's account of oppression is that it is overly inclusive. Given her commitment to the idea that there is such a thing as agent-to-agent oppression, any form of harm that anyone inflicts on another could potentially qualify as oppression, according to Haslanger's analysis. Because I reject the idea that oppression is possible when there are only two agents involved,³²⁸ my account does not suffer from this *particular* problem of over-inclusiveness. However, someone could point out that my account could still be in danger of being over-inclusive in another sense: Individuals in a group could suffer harms that are one-off, non-systemic, on non-institutional.

Recall that in section 5.2 Threshold as An Exclusionary Mechanism, I discuss an example of one group (or individuals in a group) of harming another

³²⁷ Carter, I. (2015). Value-freeness and Value-neutrality in the Analysis of Political Concepts. In: S. Wall, P. Vallentyne and D. Sobel, ed., *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy, Volume 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³²⁸ I call that domination.

group (or individuals in another group). I argued that given that the harm is not severe enough, the scenario does not qualify as oppression and is more aptly classified as an incidence of bullying. But there is another useful idea that can further clarify what makes a harm to members of a group oppressive, and that is that the harm is recurring or systemic. Even severe harms that are neither institutional nor recurring ought to not be counted as oppression. A harm that a group suffers can only count as oppression if the harm is recurring (like in the case of racialized police violence) or if it occurs within an identifiable institutional framework (like in the case of an imposition of an unjust policy to a set of employees). To avoid being problematically too inclusive, only systemic and institutional harms should count as oppressive harms.

My account of oppression is able to capture only institutional and systemic harms due to the threshold requirement, which functions as an exclusionary mechanism. By “systemic” I mean that in order for something to count as an oppressive harm, it must be widespread and recurring enough in that particular society such that it reaches a certain threshold. By “institutional” I mean that it must occur within an identifiable institutional framework, like being part of the same organization or corporation.

If a person, say a particular Norwegian by the name Anders Behring Breivik, hates leftists and goes on a shooting rampage killing sixty-nine people that he believes to be “cultural Marxists” because they belong to a leftist youth organization, no matter how tragic such an incident is, my account would not classify that as oppression if it is a one-off event that is also unlikely to be repeated. As such, it would fail to meet the threshold requirement. The one-off status of the incident and the unlikelihood of it being a regular occurrence means that leftists or “cultural Marxists” are not oppressed in Norway. Moreover, Ander Behring Breivik acted as an individual and was arguably not institutionally empowered when he committed such heinous acts, so it would also not qualify as an institutional harm. Even though he killed his victims – the most egregious form of harm – my account of oppression requires that the

agential powers to arbitrarily interfere be institutionally sourced or at least social group-based. On the other hand, if there is routine harassment and extra-judicial killing of leftists by government-authorized forces, as it is the case in the Philippines,³²⁹ then leftists are oppressed in that society because the routinized deaths and harassment compounded with the expectation that such will continue means that the threshold requirement is met.

5.4.1.3. Who are the oppressors?

If agents in Group A are the ones with the capacity to interfere arbitrarily over agents in Group B, it may seem like agents in Group A are all oppressors. But both Cudd and Haslanger point out that membership in the privileged group may be necessary but insufficient to make one an oppressor. Haslanger offers guidance on who should be called an oppressor. She argues that “it would be wrong to count all those who are privileged as oppressors.”³³⁰ She says that “an individual counts as an oppressor if their moral wrongdoing compounds the structural injustice, i.e., if they are agents of oppression within an oppressive structure.”³³¹ To be clear, all agents in Group A are members of an oppressing group or privileged group. But membership to an oppressing group is insufficient to make one an oppressor. The term “oppressor” is morally loaded. The pervasiveness of the deontological ethos and its hold on contemporary conceptions of responsibility tells us that it would be unfair to call a person an oppressor solely based on her group membership, especially when such group membership is unchosen.

Consider the case of the 2010 oil spill, for which a corporation, British Petroleum, was responsible. Holding a group responsible does not

³²⁹ Parry, R., 2020. Duterte offers £340 reward for killing a communist. *The Times*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/duterte-offers-340-to-kill-communist-rebels-90bcgjvdf>> [Accessed 4 July 2020] and Simangan, D. and Melvin, J., 2019. “Destroy and Kill ‘the Left’”: Duterte on Communist Insurgency in the Philippines with a Reflection on the Case of Suharto’s Indonesia. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 21(2), pp.214-226.

³³⁰ Haslanger, H. (2013). *Oppressions: Racial and Other*. In S. Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 316.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

automatically imply the culpability of the individuals in the group. Individual culpability is determined by the details of the situation. It would be wrong, for example, to hold a BP janitor in one their London offices even partly responsible for this disaster, especially considering the diminished employment options that non-professional workers face.

Current conceptions of moral responsibility typically require that agents have the capacity to do otherwise in order to warrant an ascription of moral responsibility. If some social group memberships are unchosen, how could we call people oppressors when they have done nothing to deserve the title? People do not, for instance, choose the social class they were born into or their skin color, etc. If people do not choose the social groups they belong to, this means that they could not have done or could not have been otherwise. If they could not have done or could not have been otherwise, attribution of the label “oppressor” seems unwarranted. Succinctly, an oppressor is an agent who is a member of the privileged group who bears moral responsibility for the oppression.

Remember that Group A could be divided into two types of agents. Whilst all agents in Group A have the capacity to arbitrarily interfere with the agents in Group B, not all agents in Group A exercise this capacity. If not all agents in Group A exercise their capacity for arbitrary interference, these agents must have a choice: they can choose to exercise their capacity for arbitrary interference or not. Those who choose to exercise their capacity for arbitrary interference are deserving of the label “oppressor,” whereas those who choose not to exercise their capacity are simply privileged members of an oppressing group.

This distinction introduced into the privileged group finds further support in the work of the philosopher Charles Mills. In *The Racial Contract*, Mills argues that “all whites are beneficiaries of [racial hierarchy], though some

whites are not signatories to it.”³³² This means that, in the context of racial hierarchy, all white people are privileged, but not all are oppressors. The main motivation for not calling all members of Group A oppressors is that such labeling might be unfair to agents who, despite having the capacity to arbitrarily interfere over others, do not. In reserving the term “oppressor” for those who exercise their capacity for arbitrary interference, we are also creating an incentive to refrain from exercising their capacity for arbitrary interference.

5.4.1.4. Who are the oppressed?

Whilst it may be tempting to apply the same reasoning used in determining who oppressors are in determining who the oppressed are, it is better, for the purposes of overcoming oppression, that the oppressed group is not divided. But this pragmatic consideration is not the entire story. The term “oppressor” does not permit gradations – a person is either an oppressor or not. The same is not true for the oppressed. People can be more or less oppressed. The distinction inherent in our republican concept of oppression, which divides agents into those who suffer arbitrary interference and those liable to arbitrary interference, functions as an indicator of the extent of oppression. Whilst all agents in Group B are oppressed, some are more oppressed than others. Most women and racial minorities suffer discrimination in some way and in that sense, are victims of oppression, but not all women have been raped³³³ and not all racial minorities have been subjected to police brutality.

Another reason to consider mere liability to arbitrary interference as a sufficient condition for calling someone oppressed is the fact that mere liability to harm can already be construed as a form of harm. A person liable to arbitrary interference is an insecure person, and such insecurity already constitutes a

³³² Mills, C. (1997). *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 11.

³³³ There are some radical feminists who think all heterosexual sex is rape, but this is still a minority view, and I do not find such claims to be either convincing or even useful.

form of harm. Whenever an individual's sex and/or skin color can cause her to fear for her life or safety – because of sexual violence or police harassment – she is suffering from oppression.

This way of identifying the oppressed finds support in feminist philosophy more generally and Haslanger's conception of a woman, more specifically. Haslanger defines a woman as "someone whose subordinated status is marked by reference to (assumed) female anatomy."³³⁴ It also finds support in theories of economic oppression because Marx and his followers consider all members of the proletariat class as oppressed. In his effort to make Marxism relevant to non-industrialized nations or Third World countries, Mao Zedong considered all members of the peasantry oppressed, and Maoists in the Philippines explicitly classify "rich peasants" as members of the oppressed in semi-feudal societies.³³⁵

There is further support of this view in the Philosophy of Race where, for instance, Mills argues that all non-whites are oppressed. Outside academia, this conception of the oppressed finds support in activist organizations. For instance, a pamphlet published in 2017 by the second largest trade union in the United Kingdom, UNISON, uses "Black" to refer to people with a "shared history." It is used "in its broad political and inclusive sense to describe people in Britain that have suffered colonialism and enslavement in the past and continue to experience racism and diminished opportunities in today's society."³³⁶

³³⁴ Haslanger, H. (2013). Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be? In S. Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 232.

³³⁵ Guerrero, A. (1979). *Specific Characteristics of People's War in the Philippines*. Unknown: International Association of Filipino Patriots.

³³⁶ UNISON National. (n.d.). *Defining Black | Black members | UNISON National*. [online] Available at: <https://www.unison.org.uk/about/what-we-do/fairness-equality/black-members/defining-black/> [Accessed 9 Apr. 2019].

5.5. Comparing Our Concept of Oppression

Now that a univocal account of oppression has been constructed and its components explained, we will do well to see how it differs from the previously rejected theories of oppression, and how it stands in relation to the concept of domination. I shall begin by examining how domination differs from oppression and then discuss the advantages of including the concept of oppression in our arsenal. I will then return to Cudd's and Haslanger's conceptions of oppression and consider how our new univocal concept improves on these problematic accounts. Finally, I will examine the relationship between Young's *Five Faces of Oppression* and this new univocal criterion.

5.5.1. Domination Versus Oppression

Domination and oppression go hand in hand. Every oppressive relationship is, by definition, also a dominating relationship. However, not all relationships of domination are oppressive relationships. Individuals *qua* individuals suffer mere domination, whilst individuals *qua* members of an oppressed social group suffer oppression. It is not inconceivable for there to be isolated cases where a person is dominated by another, where the harm from the dominating relationship is *sui generis* or unshared with others. Oppression, on the other hand, requires that the victims share a common harm — that it is a harm on a collective or group of individuals.

As such, we can distinguish oppression from domination on the grounds that the former is always a problem for a collective affecting many people. According to the political theorist Robert Dahl, “[a] political issue can hardly be said to exist unless and until it commands the attention of a significant segment of the political stratum.”³³⁷ Correspondingly, oppression can always be construed as a political issue, whereas mere domination,

³³⁷ Dahl, R. (2005). *Who Governs?* 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 92.

although plausibly always a moral issue, may not always and necessarily be a political issue.

Some concepts are politically useful, where others are not. Imagine a republican social scientist who wants to improve the conditions in a particular society. If the social scientist only has the concept of domination, she would not know where to begin her project since every human being is unique, and the relationship between any two individuals is unique. She would need to construct institutional arrangements to regulate relationships of domination between each of these unique individuals. Surely, there would be an infinite amount of cases where Institutional Arrangement A is optimal for Person A but not optimal for Person B, whereas Institutional Arrangement B is optimal for Person B but not optimal for Person A, whereas Institutional Arrangement C is optimal for Person C but not optimal for D, and so on. The social scientist would need to find a way to adjudicate between endless individual considerations or idiosyncrasies if she only had the concept of domination at her disposal.

Imagine the same social scientist equipped with the concept of oppression. She could begin her project by identifying the most serious cases of oppression. The severity of oppression is determined by the gravity of the harms and the number of people affected. She might observe that the society she finds herself in has a high incidence of violence against women specifically as members of that social group. Violence against women causes psychological trauma, physical injury, and, in some cases, death. If one in three women are victims of violence, it means the problem is pervasive, affecting many people. These facts would make the problem of violence against women, or the oppression of women, a high priority for this social scientist.

From a theoretical perspective, the social scientist armed with the concept of oppression is able to identify problems that necessarily have a social origin and are thus matters of injustice. From a practical perspective,

the concept of oppression can serve as a political heuristic giving the social scientist a better chance at increasing overall freedoms and reducing overall injustice; it gives her an opportunity to identify the biggest problems in society, and to deal with those problems in a non-piecemeal way. Whilst the infinite individual idiosyncrasies may hinder (even the conceptual) possibility of using the concept of mere domination for advancing social justice, the gravity and prevalence of collective harms would give the social scientist a place to start in her project of advancing social justice in a particular society.

Though the concept of domination has been useful in revealing what is wrong with oppression and has been instrumental in the construction of this concept of oppression, mere domination is of little political utility on its own. Though domination is, by definition, a more prevalent occurrence than oppression, the term “oppression” is more commonly used everywhere. It is part of everyday political discourse and appears significantly more frequently in media outlets. The same could not be said for domination, since mere domination is a wrong done to an individual. When political philosophers and theorists use “domination” to problematize objectionable states of affairs, they are probably really concerned with oppression. While a relationship of domination may or may not be a case of injustice – because a relationship of mere domination may have no structural origin or remedy and therefore have no nexus with justice – a case of oppression is always a case of injustice.

This is perhaps the most important point of contrast between oppression and domination. This is also something that Friedman hints at in her claim that mere power imbalance is not automatically objectionable. Oppression is always and necessarily an injustice, mere domination is not always an injustice. Consider the case of two people, where one has normal eyesight, and another is congenitally and incurably blind. A relationship of domination exists because one agent has the capacity to arbitrarily interfere with the other. But if the person who has normal eyesight never exercises her or his capacity for arbitrary interference, this dominating relationship does not

seem to be an injustice. This is just a case of brute luck. As Elizabeth Anderson argues, “the proper ... aim of egalitarian justice is not to eliminate the impact of brute luck from human affairs, but to end oppression, which by definition is socially imposed.”³³⁸

5.5.2. Improvement on Cudd’s account: No Need for Identity

Recall that Cudd’s account of oppression is untenable because one of her criteria — the requirement that the harmed social group have an identity independent of the harm — functions as an unjustifiable exclusionary mechanism. On a *subjective* interpretation of her identity requirement, we see that Cudd’s account has the counter-intuitive result that the onset of colonialism is not an instance of oppression. On an *objective* interpretation of her identity requirement, her account ends up excluding the poor. The question we must now ask is whether the removal of the identity requirement is sufficient to make her concept of oppression tenable. Simultaneously, we should consider whether our new republican concept is analogous to Cudd’s amended account.

If we remove Cudd’s identity requirement, we are left with, (1) the harm condition, (2) the social group condition, (3) the privilege group condition, and (4) the coercion condition. This republican concept of oppression states that there is oppression whenever Agent A, *qua* member of Group A, has the capacity to arbitrarily interfere with Agent B, *qua* member of Group B, and some agents in Group A exercise their capacity, which results in harm in some agents in Group B.

At first blush, we see two points of comparison between Cudd’s account and this new account. Cudd’s criteria 2 (the social group condition) and 3 (the privileged group condition) capture the collective aspect or the social group aspect in this republican account. More precisely, Cudd’s criteria

³³⁸ Anderson, E. (1999). What Is the Point of Equality?. *Ethics*, 109(2), pp.288.

2 and 3 are analogous to Group B and Group A, respectively. Group A is the privileged group because the agents in Group A are the ones who have the capacity to arbitrarily interfere with the agents in Group B. Group B is analogous to the harmed social group in Cudd's conception, because the agents in Group B are the ones who are not protected from arbitrary interferences and suffer harms.

Secondly, the coercion condition is captured in the very notion of interference. In fact, Pettit himself appears to use coercion and interference synonymously. So, there is another point of convergence between Cudd's account and this new republican concept of oppression. Finally, Cudd's harm condition is explicitly accommodated in this new republican concept because I require that some members of the privilege group exercise their capacity for arbitrary interference and such exercises are inevitably harmful. If a capacity for arbitrary interference is exercised but no harm occurs, this would not count as an instance of oppression in the conception being defended.

Removing Cudd's identity criterion means that her account would no longer exclude the cases discussed in the previous chapter. It is important to acknowledge that this revision — the removal of the identity criterion — substantially revises Cudd's concept of oppression. It would cease to be a backward-looking, time-sensitive concept. Cudd's identity criterion made her conception of oppression politically unhelpful because the fulfillment of the identity requirement could mean that harms need to accumulate over time for an identity to develop. If Cudd were to have a conversation with employees of a corporation who want to resist the imposition of an unjust policy, her conception of oppression, which figures oppression to be understood as “a long-term process, consisting of many events,”³³⁹ would not permit the employees to use it to describe the imposition of an unjust policy. On the other hand, my account captures this because I explicitly state that institutional harms count as oppressive.

³³⁹ Cudd, A. (2006). *Analyzing Oppression*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, p. 167.

Perhaps one could argue that it is not necessary to construct a new republican concept of oppression because a minor adjustment to Cudd's conception is sufficient to salvage her account. Given that Cudd conceives of her 4-point criteria for oppression as a liberal account, it may seem obvious to proceed with the project of constructing and revising a concept that is firmly embedded in the liberal framework. Moreover, since a minor amendment in Cudd's account – removing the independent group identity criterion – is sufficient to make it defensible, it may seem like the obvious next step is to build on Cudd's work, especially considering the radical departures that I have proposed from Pettit's theory of domination.

First, I will explain why the republican framework is better for the analysis of the concept of oppression. Then, I will offer two reasons that speak directly to why using Pettit's language is better than using Cudd's. Firstly, the republican concept of freedom can be cast as the republican concept of emancipation, which is a specific type of freedom. Recall that in Chapter One of this thesis, I argued that the Marxist conception of oppression can be distilled of its materialist focus and that the Marxist method of identifying antagonistic social classes can guide the quest for a univocal theory of oppression. Antagonistic interests are what underlies the notion that there are antagonistic social classes. Whenever the interests of one group are in antagonistic conflict with the interests of agents in another group, it means that the freedoms of the privileged group are at the expense or detriment of the subordinated individuals. The freedom of capitalists to drive down wages and production costs are at the expense and detriment of workers. Prior to the coining of the notion of marital rape, husbands had the freedom to rape their wives. Coleman argues that the freedom of association of humans “racialized as white” are at the expense and detriment of people “racialized as black.”

However, it is not entirely correct to say that the idea of antagonistic interests is originally Marxist. It is undoubtedly popularized by Marx and

Marxists, but the idea that there are antagonistic interests underlying conditions of domination or oppression was originally republican. As Gourevitch points out, the republican conception of liberty was born out of the “paradox of slavery and liberty.” According to Gourevitch, “the independence of free citizens presupposed the dependence of slaves”³⁴⁰ because the freedom that free citizens were able to enjoy were due to the unfreedoms that the slaves suffered. The slaves did all the menial tasks that allowed non-slaves to live free from being encumbered with daily, menial toil. This, in turn, effectively created the possibility for non-slaves to be free. Benjamin Constant takes note of this in his statement that “without the slave population of Athens, 20,000 Athenians could never have spent every day at the public square in discussions.”³⁴¹

Although some liberals, like in Haslanger’s definition of “woman” and Charles Mills’ account of non-whites, have adopted class-based analyses for their accounts of oppression, the liberal framework is not particularly conducive for the analysis of antagonistic interests because liberals tend to focus on our common humanity and often demand that everyone cooperates to overcome conditions of oppression and injustice. But the emphasis on our common humanity masks the need to frame the challenge of overcoming oppression in the antagonizing language of attacking the freedoms of the privileged. The notion of cooperation gives the veneer of uniformity or similarity in the interests of the groups being called to engage in cooperative activity. Since liberty is the core idea and motivating value which underpins all of liberalism, it is difficult to advance a liberal concept of oppression because overcoming oppression requires the obliteration of privileges protected under the guise of liberty. In the words of an anonymous labor republican author (that

³⁴⁰ Gourevitch, A., 2015. *From Slavery To The Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor And Republican Liberty In The 19th Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 19.

³⁴¹ On p. 19 of Gourevitch, A., 2015. *From Slavery To The Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor And Republican Liberty In The 19th Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, he quotes Benjamin Constant in Constant, B. 1988 [1816]. *The Liberty of the Ancients as Compared with that of the Moderns*. In: Biancamaria Fontana, ed., *Constant: Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 314.

Gourevitch cites), “How can they love and believe in liberty? It [sic] is the total negation of their presumptuous authority.”³⁴²

Whilst some liberal conceptions of freedom could be construed as concerned with the freedom of the oppressed, the republican conception of freedom is always and necessarily about the freedom of the dominated and oppressed. As Pettit points out, “in the republican tradition... liberty is always cast in terms of the opposition between *liber* and *servus*, citizen and slave.”³⁴³ The reason why republicans conceive of freedom as non-domination is because the slaves lived under the dominating powers of their masters, and so freedom, or perhaps more accurately, emancipation became an issue. There is a sense in which the republican conception of freedom can be called a republican conception of emancipation. This is why William Clare Roberts saw “Marx as radicalizing the republican tradition for which freedom as non-domination is the highest virtue of institutions.”³⁴⁴

Secondly, agency is better accounted for in Pettit’s account, which aids the allocation of moral responsibility. Recall that in Cudd’s account there are four components: that there is a harm that befalls a social group, that the harmed group have an identity that is independent of the harm, that there is a privileged group that benefits from the harm, and finally that there is coercion or in bringing about the harm. None of the components take into account the fact that it is individuals who commit acts of oppression and that it is individuals who are vulnerable to the harms of oppression. There is no recognition of the role of individual agency in oppressive circumstances.

³⁴² On p. 102 of Gourevitch, A., 2015. *From Slavery To The Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor And Republican Liberty In The 19th Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, he quotes an anonymous labor republican with the bibliographic reference Unsigned. Chapters on Labor: Chapter V (Continued). JUL, September 25, 1885, 1082.

³⁴³ Pettit, P., 2010. *Republicanism*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, p. 31.

³⁴⁴ Roberts, W., 2018. *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 231.

A plausible reason for this is that Cudd is explicitly against methodological individualism, which she characterizes as “all explanations of social phenomena must in principle be reducible to statements about individuals, including their beliefs, desires, goals, and so on.”³⁴⁵ It might be argued that she is so committed to proving her point about the explanatory utility of social groups that it prevented her from filling in further the details of how the individuals in groups are harmed or privileged in contexts of oppression. Just because social groups are “explanatorily useful concept(s)” does not mean that explanation or characterization of the phenomena must also end there. The upshot of the absence of the role of agency is that it becomes difficult to assign responsibility. As we shall see in Chapter 7, this detail in Pettit’s account guides the allocation of responsibilities.

Third and finally, the relationship between agency and one’s social location or social group membership is revealed in using the language of the republican concept of oppression that is being defended. Through the stipulation that agents are either liable to or have the capacity for arbitrary interference, where such capacity and liability are sourced from one’s social location or social group membership, we gain an understanding of how oppression operates in practice. Whereas Cudd’s account merely describes the components involved in the phenomenon of oppression (i.e, it is an account of what constitutes oppression), the republican language also allows us to see not only what constitutes oppression (hence, it is analogous to Cudd’s) but also the mechanisms involved in its operation.

So even though both the amended Cudd account and the converted republican criteria for oppression are analogous in the sense that they both pick out the same phenomena in the world, there is a sense in which Cudd’s account is deficient because it does not include individual agency. Agency is of pivotal importance for moral and political philosophers because it gives us a place to start in the ascription of moral responsibility. Though the terms

³⁴⁵ Cudd, A., 2006. *Analyzing Oppression*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 46

“water” and “H₂O” are analogous in the sense that they pick out the same thing, the latter gives you the chemical composition which helps inform chemical characteristics of the substance, which is useful for students of chemistry.³⁴⁶ Cudd’s account is like water, and mine is like H₂O. The information about the chemical composition is useful for chemists, the detail about agency in my account is vital for moral and political philosophers. Cudd’s theory does not show that the hierarchy between the privileged and the oppressed is constituted by a differential distribution of agential capacities. An awareness of this has important implications on the ascription of responsibilities.

5.5.3. Improvement on Haslanger’s Account

The problem with Haslanger’s conception of oppression is that her account is too inclusive. For Haslanger, oppression is not necessarily group-based: she thinks there could be agent-to-agent oppression, where only one agent is oppressed. This was rejected because most theorists of oppression insist the harm in oppression has to be shared. There is something amiss with Haslanger’s insistence that a single agent can suffer oppression. In addition, Haslanger argues that brute physical force can also count as oppression. Given these two details, her conception appears to lead to the view that anyone who is harmed by anything another agent does could be classed as oppressive. In being too inclusive, Haslanger’s account fails to illuminate the distinctive wrong of oppression.

Haslanger argues that “oppression’s wrong lies in the use of power — not just social power but power of any kind, including physical power — to harm another unjustly.”³⁴⁷ She uses the case of a terrorist hostage-taker to try

³⁴⁶ Another way to think about this is that there are two maps of an island. Both maps are accurate, and they pick out the same island. But one of the maps has details about rivers and other bodies of water, which the other does not have.

³⁴⁷ Haslanger, H. (2013). *Oppressions: Racial and Other*. In S. Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 313.

to demonstrate that brute physical force can be oppressive, saying that “oppression is not necessarily about the exercise of social power: a terrorist may oppress a hostage through brute force... The hostage-taking may even be motivated by the fact that the hostage has greater social power and authority than the terrorist himself.”³⁴⁸ But do we not have the intuition that this is not a case of oppression? The scenario that Haslanger is describing is better characterized as mere domination because, firstly, there is only one victim, and, secondly, because the power that the hostage-taker wields is arguably not institutionally or socially sourced. Even if we revise the scenario and add more hostages to make the victims of the harm a collective, we still would not have the intuition that this is a case of oppression because the scenario is *sui generis*.

Now that we have finalized this new republican concept of oppression and introduced the notion of threshold as an exclusionary mechanism, it is worthwhile to explain why Haslanger’s account cannot be fixed by adding a similar threshold requirement. Haslanger thinks agent-to-agent oppression is possible – so adding a threshold will not fix the issue, since she would still be committed to the idea that a single person could suffer oppression. In this republican conception, a single person in a *sui generis* scenario can be liable to suffering arbitrary interference, but that is mere domination. It is only when a harm is shared with others that the harm qualifies as oppression.

Moreover, our concept of oppression more accurately reflects the historical trajectory of the concept of oppression because it explicitly specifies that only social or institutional power is oppressive. Because Haslanger allows that mere brute physical force can be oppressive, her account does not reflect the fact that the origin of the concept of oppression relies on background conditions, which enable social or political power. Put another way, it is an unfortunate consequence that oppression could occur in the state of nature according to her understanding. Haslanger’s conception of oppression

³⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 313.

betrays some form of etymological discontinuity by allowing brute physical force as a form of oppression.

5.5.4. Comparing it with Young's *Five Faces of Oppression*

It is important to acknowledge that this new republican concept of oppression is not in conflict with Young's *Five Faces of Oppression*. Young's project is motivated by the fact that "there exists no sustained theoretical analysis of the concept of oppression"³⁴⁹ within the discourse of "contemporary emancipatory social movements." I was motivated by the fact that there is very little effort made towards finding a common denominator between Young's *Five Faces*. Young paved the way for a meta-theoretical analysis by offering the *Five Faces*, and this univocal republican conception should be viewed as complementary to her project. This new republican conception reveals the underlying essence of the concept of oppression. This essentialist project states that group-based liability to arbitrary interferences is the common denominator among those who are exploited, marginalized, powerless, victims of systemic violence, and cultural imperialism. As such, there is considerable theoretical continuity between Young's *Five Faces* and our new republican concept of oppression.

5.6. Summary of From Domination to Oppression

This chapter has two main parts. In the first, a republican, univocal account of oppression is defended. In the second, the newly constructed concept of oppression is compared with other conceptions. The chapter began with arguments about why the concept of structural domination should be replaced with oppression, followed by a conversion of the republican theory of domination into one of oppression by replacing the notion of individual agency with the notion of social groups. However, because the groups that

³⁴⁹ Young, I. (2011). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 9.

are referred to are not group agents, it was suggested that we cannot simply substitute the term “agent” in Pettit’s formulation with “social group.” As such, I continued to use the notion of agency and instead sourced an agent’s capacity for and liability to arbitrary interference from an agent’s social group membership. We ended up with the formulation which says that Group A oppresses Group B if and only if Agent A, *qua* member of Group A, has the capacity to interfere over Agent B, *qua* member of Group B, and some agents in A exercise the capacity which results in harm in some agents in B. Given this definition, it was acknowledged that I may be unable to exclude certain cases that contradict our intuitions, so the notion of threshold was added as an exclusionary mechanism.

The components of the formulation were then considered. I started with the term “arbitrary interference” and defined it as something that does not track the interests of the person being interfered with. I then asked: who are the oppressor, and who are the oppressed? I identified the agents of the group that have the capacity to interfere as the privileged group. I then divided the privileged group into those who exercise the capacity and those who do not, calling only those who exercise the capacity ‘oppressor.’ In the interest of achieving the widest possible solidarity amongst those who are liable to and those who actually suffer arbitrary interference, I considered all those in Group B oppressed, with the reminder that the term “oppressed” allows for gradations — people can be more or less oppressed. As such, those who are merely liable to arbitrary interferences are less oppressed than those who actually suffer arbitrary interferences.

The second part of this chapter, Comparing Our Concept of Oppression, began with a discussion of the distinction between domination and oppression. Whilst every oppressive relationship is, by definition also a dominating relationship, the reverse is not true. There can be dominating relationships that are *sui generis*. It was pointed out that whilst all oppression is, due to its institutional feature, necessarily unjust, some cases of domination

may not be unjust because domination does not always involve social structures and can be a case of mere brute luck.

An extended comparison was offered between this new concept of oppression and Cudd's. Firstly, it was pointed out that because this new concept does not have a social identity requirement, it does not suffer from the exclusionary problem of Cudd's account. Despite this improvement, it was acknowledged that there is much theoretical similarity between this new concept of oppression and Cudd's account. This was taken as evidence that there is consistency and continuity in the development of our understanding of the concept of oppression. However, it was noted that Cudd's account is deficient due to the absence of agency, which is important for the succeeding question of allocating responsibility.

A comparison was also made between the newly defended concept and Haslanger's account. Haslanger's two-pronged conception suffers from being too inclusive. Given that this conception of oppression has a harm threshold, it was argued that this new account is an improvement on Haslanger's. Moreover, it was pointed out that Haslanger is unable to fix the problem of over-inclusivity by adding a similar threshold requirement because she thinks both that agent-to-agent oppression is possible and that brute physical force can be oppressive. Finally, it was acknowledged that there is much theoretical continuity between Young's *Five Faces of Oppression* and this new univocal concept of oppression.

CHAPTER SIX

The Epistemology of Oppression

6. How Do We Know If There Is Oppression?

According to this new conception of oppression, Group A oppresses Group B if and only if Agent A, *qua* member of Group A, has the capacity to arbitrarily interfere with Agent B, *qua* member of Group B, and some agents in A exercise the capacity which results in harm to some agents in B. We clarified that arbitrary interference is any voluntary action that does not track the interests of the person subjected to it and results in harm or a reduction in the person's wellbeing, where interests are understood objectively.

The description above is an ontological criterion. I have mostly been silent on the epistemology of oppression. In divorcing the ontology and epistemology of oppression, it becomes conceptually possible that oppression can exist without anyone knowing about it. In practice, however, it is highly unlikely that oppression can exist without anyone having an awareness of it. In some cases, the existence of more overt and extreme forms of oppression can work to conceal disadvantages and inequalities that could otherwise count as oppression.

6.1. The Threat of Cultural Imperialism: A Critique of An Objective Conception of Interests

In Chapter 4, *Domination and Internalized Oppression*, I offered a critique of the subjective account of interests and demonstrated why it often fails to capture prevalent and non-controversial cases of oppression. I illustrated how the victims of oppression are especially susceptible to internalizing oppression, bringing about deformed desires, and suffering from undermined agency.

Pettit, like many defenders of autonomy, relies on a subjective conception of interests because it avoids the problem of paternalism, which he considers to be an “exemplar” of domination. We must consider this problem of paternalism as a serious potential objection against the objective interests account in this new concept of oppression. As Berlin put it so eloquently in his *Two Concepts of Liberty*, “once [we] take this view, [we would be] in a position to ignore the actual wishes of men, [women, and non-binary people], to bully, oppress torture them in the name, and on behalf of, their ‘real’ selves, in the secure knowledge that whatever is the true goal of man, [woman, and non-binary people] (happiness, performance of duty, wisdom, a just society, self-fulfillment) must be identical with his, [her, or their] freedom— the free choice of his, [her, or their] ‘true’, albeit often submerged and inarticulate, self.”³⁵⁰

This objection can be couched in epistemic terms. We can ask: How do we know or make a justified judgment that there is oppression? It seems like our reliance on an objective conception of interests could, in practice, license various forms of coercion because oppression theorists and moral pioneers might be empowered to coercively enforce their objective conception of interests upon those who disagree. If I claim to have special knowledge of what is objectively good for you — knowledge that you lack due to false consciousness or through the damaging effects of internalizing oppressive social structures — I am taking a paternalistic stance towards you. I am saying that I know better than you. If I am so confident that I know what is in the objective interests of human beings, John Rawls might have been right to worry about how such a commitment may produce “zeal”³⁵¹ and “a relentless struggle to win the world for the whole truth.”³⁵²

³⁵⁰ Hardy, H. (2002). *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 10.

³⁵¹ Rawls, J. (2005). *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 42.

³⁵² Rawls, J. and Freeman, S. (2001). *Collected Papers*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, p. 574.

History furnishes us with numerous examples of outsiders exercising their purported special knowledge and proclaiming, from an Archimedean standpoint, that they have access to what is in the objective interests of others. European empires in the Age of Exploration and later Western powers often saw the civilizing mission as an important rationale for intervention and colonization of those they deemed to be savage indigenous peoples. Currently, Western feminists seek to change certain practices of women in other regions and in multicultural societies they consider to be oppressive, despite resistance by the alleged victims of these purportedly backward ways of life.

6.1.1. Colonization

Take the case of the United States' annexation of the Philippines. The poem *The White Man's Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands* by Rudyard Kipling captures the rationale and logic of the colonizers with good intentions to educate and civilize the "half-devil and half-child" natives of the territory.³⁵³ Kipling argues that it is the duty of the white man to emancipate non-white natives by teaching them Western ways of life. This belief in the superiority of Western ways of life functioned as a legitimizing tool for the occupation of the territory. As Frank Golay puts it, the US colonization of the Philippines "rested upon a belief in the so called 'manifest destiny' of the United States as a rising power... as the new bearer of freedom and democracy to 'benighted peoples' outside the pale of Western civilization."³⁵⁴

The indigenous peoples in the territory had been organizing themselves to fight and overthrow Spanish colonial rule when the Gringos hijacked their

³⁵³ Kipling, R. (1899). *The White Man's Burden* | *Representative Poetry Online*. [online] Available at: <https://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poems/white-mans-burden> [Accessed 29 Apr. 2019].

³⁵⁴ Golay, F. (1966). *Philippine American Relations*. Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, p. 9.

revolutionary efforts and installed a new form of colonial rule.³⁵⁵ They may have sincerely believed that their interference was benevolent, but many of the native inhabitants considered their intervention an arbitrary interference, robbing them of the capacity to self-determine. While in many cases the “civilizing mission” may have been mere rhetoric, some of the Gringos may have actually had genuinely good intentions. Moreover, because the new colonizers apparently viewed themselves as engaged in a benevolent enterprise – consider, for instance, their policy called Benevolent Assimilation – they viewed themselves as having rights to the natural resources of the territory. As such, in 1946, the Philippine Constitution was amended to allow equal rights for US citizens in the use and appropriation of the natural resources of the territory. Many Filipinos viewed this constitutional amendment as an arbitrary interference in the interests of the native inhabitants. This example clearly shows that in trying to rescue others from oppression, one can also become an oppressor.

6.1.2. Western Feminism

Similarly, some Western feminists could be charged with cultural imperialism. Western feminists sometimes use the concept of oppression – based on an objective account of interests – to argue that certain practices of women are oppressive (sexist and/or misogynistic) even when the women willingly engage in the practices. We find an example of this in Terri Murray’s article *Why Feminists Should Oppose the Burka*. She argues, “The claim that covering yourself up in public is an empowering choice insults the intelligence and dignity of women everywhere.”³⁵⁶ Western feminists lead the campaign to ban the burka in some societies, arguing that it is an oppressive religious practice.

³⁵⁵ Guerrero, A. [*nom de guerre* of Jose Maria Sison] (1970). *Philippine Society and Revolution*. Manila: Pulang Tala Publications.

³⁵⁶ Murray, T. (2013). Why feminists should oppose the burqa. *New Humanist*. [online] Available at: <https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/4199/why-feminists-should-oppose-the-burqa> [Accessed 28 Apr. 2019].

There is a sense, however, in which Murray's advocacy is culturally imperialistic towards burka-wearing women. As Young writes, "cultural imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm... Often without noticing they do so, the dominant groups project their own experience as representative of humanity as such."³⁵⁷ In Murray's quotation, it is clear she is attempting to speak for all women. Yet, the Western feminist is speaking not from experience or from a privileged social position but as an outsider to the social practice she is criticizing. Moreover, the call to oppose the burka occurs in a broader social environment characterized by rampant Islamophobia.

Although the Western feminist's critique of the burka may be well-intentioned, borne from what Mao Zedong calls starting "from the desire for unity,"³⁵⁸ the effect of coercively banning the burka could be construed as cultural imperialism and therefore, as per Young, a form of oppression itself. When there is no uptake or agreement from practitioners of the allegedly oppressive practice, claims of oppression or injustice cannot be justified. Yet, the Western feminist, so sure of what is in the objective interests of women, can disregard the preferences, protestations, and reasons of women who participate in the practice of wearing burkas. As Cecile Laborde puts it, "the paternalistic ban on hijab [is] a form of state oppression."³⁵⁹

This tension between an objective account of interests and the apparent interests of the alleged victims is particularly striking when the coercive nature of the paternalism results in organized protests against the purported liberation by the alleged victims. The Western feminist who is, from her own perspective, attempting to emancipate burka-wearing women could be likened to agents

³⁵⁷ Young, I. (2011). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 59.

³⁵⁸ Tse-Tung, M. (n.d.). *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People*. [online] Marxists.org. Available at: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_58.htm [Accessed 28 Apr. 2019].

³⁵⁹ Laborde, C. (2008). *Critical Republicanism: The Hijab Controversy and Political Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 125.

of the Soviet Union attempting to emancipate, for example, Hungarians from what they deemed to be the oppression of people under a capitalist system. Like the Hungarians, resisting the Soviet imposition of an economic and political order they did not accept,³⁶⁰ Muslim women in Copenhagen have also organized themselves in protest against the banning of the burka, a move that they construed as an arbitrary interference.³⁶¹

6.2. Pragmatist Standpoint Epistemology

Cheryl Misak rightly notes that “we are in fact frequently moved to wonder whether there are indeed standards by which we can criticize a particular way of life, a value, or a practice as being bad, unjust, or immoral.”³⁶² In order to protect our reliance on an objective conception of interests from objectives based on the possibility of coercion and paternalistic abuse, I can introduce the idea of a pragmatist standpoint epistemology. This, perhaps, is the best way to think about normative truth in applying this theory of oppression.

Firstly, let us begin with the pragmatist conception of truth. We can draw on pragmatists, like the classical pragmatist C.S. Pierce and the new pragmatist Cheryl Misak: these theorists argue that truth can be attained by taking deliberation and inquiry to the limit, as far as they can go, and that that the beliefs which result at the end of such inquiry constitute the truth. Secondly, to address the epistemic question -- How do we know if there is oppression? – we can draw on insights from standpoint epistemology. Both feminists and Marxists note that the experiences of women and the working class, respectively, provide insight and specialized knowledge on the topic of the oppression of women and oppression under capitalism.

³⁶⁰ Encyclopedia Britannica. (2019). *Hungarian Revolution | 1956*. [online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Hungarian-Revolution-1956> [Accessed 28 Apr. 2019].

³⁶¹ The Guardian (2018). Protests in Denmark as 'burqa ban' comes into effect. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/01/danish-burqa-ban-comes-into-effect-amid-protests> [Accessed 28 Apr. 2019].

³⁶² Misak, C. (2000). *Truth, Politics, Morality*. London: Routledge, p. 4.

Finally, we combine the pragmatist account of truth with the standpoint requirement to introduce the idea of pragmatist standpoint epistemology. Whether or not a particular group is oppressed depends on the verdict of all inquirers at the end of inquiry. But the best approximation in this hypothetical idealized situation is what is believed by those inquirers who are currently closest to the ideal inquirer, which is to say people who are in an appropriate social location – in the right standpoint.

6.2.1. The Pragmatist Conception of Truth

In this section, I will give an overview of the pragmatist conception of truth and show how it differs from correspondence and coherence theories of truth. The literature is vast, so I shall only be discussing the most relevant points. To thoroughly engage with the question of how to conceive of truth is beyond the scope of this dissertation, so what follows shall be a rough sketch.

The problem that our current account of oppression now faces is how to determine true objective interests free of abusive paternalism. What determines whether a particular situation truly constitutes an oppressive state of affairs wherein objective interests are arbitrarily interfered with? How do we know whether an assessment of oppression is justified?

Let us begin with the first question. It is a question about truth. Against non-cognitivists, Misak is committed to the view that moral and political statements can be true or false and that moral and political deliberation aims at truth. She is committed to the idea that “judgments about what ought to be done, what is good and what is just can be true or false.”³⁶³ For pragmatists, the core of the pragmatist conception of truth is that “a true belief would be the best belief, were we to inquire as far as we could on the matter.”³⁶⁴ It is

³⁶³ Ibid., p. 2.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 49.

important to recognize that by “best,” Misak does not mean “best for our lives or most comfortable,” as some other pragmatists understand it.

How, then, is the best belief determined? One view is that “a true belief is one which would be agreed upon at the hypothetical end of inquiry.”³⁶⁵ Misak proposes an alternative, where a “true belief is one which could not be improved upon.” Whatever the approach, the “central insight of pragmatism is that there is a connection between truth and inquiry - that philosophical theory must keep in touch with the practical business of inquiry.”

We find, in Peirce’s *How to Make Ideas Clear*, the pragmatist maxim – a rule for clarifying the contents of hypotheses by tracing their practical consequences.³⁶⁶ As Misak summarizes it, “the pragmatic maxim requires our concepts to be linked to experience and practice.”³⁶⁷ In the material or physical world, truth can be mind-independent. If there is a volcano on an island, there is a volcano on an island regardless of whether anyone perceives it. In the realm of morality and politics in general and oppression in particular, truth cannot be completely mind-independent. The fact or truth that a piece of paper is £10 is mind-dependent because the value or worth of the piece of paper is determined by the existence of social institutions and collective intentionality. There is nothing intrinsic to nor any material component of the £10 note that makes it worth £10. In the social realm, human intentionality is partly constitutive of reality. The statement that slavery is unjust is made true partly because of the experiences of slaves. As Misak notes, “we cannot answer questions about injustice without taking what is experienced as unjust into account.”³⁶⁸

³⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 49.

³⁶⁶ The term pragmatism was actually introduced by another classical pragmatist William James in a series of lectures in 1907.

³⁶⁷ Misak, C. (2018). The Pragmatist Theory of Truth. In: G. Michael, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 283.

³⁶⁸ Misak, C. (2000). *Truth, Politics, Morality*. London: Routledge, p. 82.

Misak also argues that “it should be clear that pragmatism, of any stripe, will be set against versions of the correspondence theory of truth, on which a statement is true if it gets right or mirrors the human-independent world.”³⁶⁹ According to proponents of the correspondence theory, a belief is true if there exists a fact to which it corresponds, like our example of a volcano on an island.

Pragmatists do not necessarily reject the correspondence theory but argue that truth has to be grounded in experience. Classical pragmatists, like Pierce, think “that the correspondence concept of truth is missing a connection with our practices.”³⁷⁰ As Misak notes, truth “is not... a property that holds regardless of the possibilities of human inquiry.”³⁷¹ In the context of oppression, this means that one cannot determine the truth about people’s objective interests without taking into account their experiences and their consciousness. Moreover, the notion of arbitrary interference, like the notion of the value of money, requires value judgment, which by definition is, mind-dependent.

Another competing theory of truth is coherence theory, which posits that a belief is true if and only if it is part of a coherent system of beliefs. While the end of inquiry is expected to produce a coherent system of beliefs, a coherent set of beliefs in itself is insufficient to establish truth about objective interests, particularly if it is detached from experience and reality. We have discussed cases where an individual’s subjective interests – which may be part of a coherent belief system – do not reflect the objective interests of that individual, particularly in certain cases of internalized oppression.

By drawing on experience and inquiry, pragmatists offer a theory of truth that is free from the “sea of arbitrariness, where there is no truth or where

³⁶⁹ Misak, C. (2018). The Pragmatist Theory of Truth. In: G. Michael, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 284.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

³⁷¹ Misak, C. (2000). *Truth, Politics, Morality*. London: Routledge, p 50.

truth varies from person to person.”³⁷² As Misak notes, for pragmatists, “truth is not at the mercy of the vagaries of individuals, as some suppose it to be, nor is it a matter of getting right the believer-independent world, as others suppose.”³⁷³ In that sense, as the classical pragmatist William James put it, pragmatism is a mediating philosophy that can be viewed as a method for settling metaphysical disputes.³⁷⁴ Adopting a pragmatist account of truth serves the broader aim of this project, which is to offer a theory of oppression that is useful in the fight against injustice in the real world.

In line with the pragmatist conception of truth, the truth or falsity of claims of oppression is grounded in experience; that truth is not an ephemeral or transcendental phenomenon. The true objective interests of an individual and group are grounded in experience. As Misak notes, the fact that our inquiries are historically situated does not mean that they lack objectivity.³⁷⁵ Moreover, Misak argues “moral and political judgments can be true or false, despite the fact that people, within specific cultures and contexts, bring moral and political principles into being.”³⁷⁶

Consistent with this pragmatist conception of truth is the thought that idealized inquiry can determine whether or not some situation is an instance of oppression. Inquiry is at the heart of the pragmatist conception of truth. If everybody, possessing all the relevant information, agrees at the end of a hypothetical inquiry that a situation is an instance of oppression, that answers the ultimate ontological question. We shall refer to this as *hypothetical idealized deliberation*. For Misak, philosophy must try to leave the business of inquiry intact. She states: “Wanting to maintain the way we go about moral deliberation is not a recommendation of conservatism or the preservation of

³⁷² Misak, C. (2018). The Pragmatist Theory of Truth. In: G. Michael, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 302.

³⁷³ Misak, C. (2000). *Truth, Politics, Morality*. London: Routledge, 2.

³⁷⁴ James, W. and Kuklick, B. (1981). *Pragmatism*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, p. 28.

³⁷⁵ Misak, C. (2018). The Pragmatist Theory of Truth. In: G. Michael, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 22.

³⁷⁶ Misak, C. (2000). *Truth, Politics, Morality*. London: Routledge, p. 12.

the *status quo*. It is not a recommendation of anything, but an acknowledgement of the necessary rootedness of a theory in practice.”³⁷⁷

6.2.2. Standpoint Epistemology

According to pragmatists, truth is what we come to believe at the end of a hypothetical idealized inquiry. Now let us turn to the second question: How do we know whether it is justified to believe there is oppression?

One’s social location can mean that one has particular skills of inquiry or special knowledge suited to a specific topic of inquiry. We find this thought in feminist and Marxist theory: the experiences of those who are liable to arbitrary interferences are instrumental in understanding oppression and injustice. For feminists, women and other members of gender oppressed groups have special insight into the workings of patriarchy. For Marxists, the proletariat’s consciousness is essential to understanding the injustice of capitalism. Similarly, Misak notes, “some predicates might be such that an outsider lacks the requisite qualification to contribute profitably to a discussion... one can lack the requisite background knowledge and thus one can be, for good reason, disqualified from being a serious participant in certain inquiries.”³⁷⁸

Although the term “standpoint epistemology” was popularized by feminists, the idea that the oppressed possess certain valuable knowledge goes back to Marx. More recent Marxists continue to rely on the idea that the experiences and consciousness of the working class are necessary for eradicating oppression and advancing revolutionary justice. Scott Harrison, for example, argues for the necessity of a three-step process wherein revolutionaries must engage with the experiences and consciousness of the proletariat. The three steps are, (1), “gathering the diverse ideas of the masses;

³⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 82.

(2) processing or concentrating these ideas from the perspective of revolutionary Marxism, in light of the long-term, ultimate interests of the masses... and in light of a scientific analysis of the objective situation; and (3) returning these concentrated ideas to the masses in the form of a political line which will actually advance the mass struggle toward revolution.”³⁷⁹

Analogously, Patricia Hill Collins argues that “the notion of standpoint refers to the historically shared, group-based experiences... groups having shared histories based on their shared location in relations of power.”³⁸⁰ The notion of standpoint is applicable to race, gender, class, sexual orientation, disability, and any other categorical description that could make one liable to arbitrary interference. If the issue at hand is FGM, then the appropriate deliberators are individuals who are expected to undergo the procedure. If the issue at hand is the wages of employees of a particular company, then the appropriate deliberators are the employees whose wages are the subject of scrutiny. If the issue is the burka, then the appropriate deliberators are those who are supposed to be wearing the burka.

Though the origins of feminist standpoint theory are arguably Marxist, there is much discussion within the philosophy of science about the role that situatedness plays in the construction or discovery of knowledge. For example, Kathryn Addelson pointed to the underrepresentation of women in science and the concern that scientific knowledge might be shaped by the dominant perspective of men.³⁸¹ As Mark Weaver, Claudia Thompson, and Susan Newton write, “women have different realities from men, structured by their different material positions and the ideological supports for those

³⁷⁹ Harrison, S. (n.d.). *The Mass Line and the American Revolutionary Movement*. [online] Massline.info. Available at: <http://www.massline.info/mlms/mlms.htm> [Accessed 29 Apr. 2019].

³⁸⁰ Collins, P. (1997). Comment on Hekman's Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited”: Where's the Power?. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 22(2), pp.376.

³⁸¹ Addelson, K. (2003). The Man of Professional Wisdom. In: S. Harding and M. Hintika, ed., *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and the Philosophy of Science*, 2nd ed. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, pp.165-186.

positions. Moreover, their absence as practicing scientists affects the practice of science and the very content of scientific knowledge.”³⁸² Earlier, Dorothy Smith pointed to the epistemic advantage of women over men in their experience of bifurcated consciousness, both as sociologists dealing with the conceptual world and women dealing with material reality. On the one hand, women sociologists operate in a field dominated by men where the concepts are derived from the male social universe, resulting in the inability to find “correlates of the theory in their experiences.”³⁸³ On the other hand, actual worlds of women and men also differ, with the former standing “in a dependent relation to that other and its whole character is subordinated to it.”³⁸⁴ These early works highlighted the relationship between social position and perspective and between perspective and epistemology.

Analysis of these relationships gave rise to Harding and Hartsock’s account of standpoint theory. The feminist standpoint theory encompasses three theses: situated knowledge, epistemic privilege, and achievement. The notion of situated knowledge is based on the idea of differentiated knowers – people with different experiences, inhabiting different social locations, and thereby having differences in perspective. The differences in perspective, particularly where differentiated knowers cannot have the same experiences (as is the case with oppressors and the oppressed) have epistemic consequences. In other words, there is a strong tie between social location and epistemic position. Feminist standpoint epistemology builds on the Marxist idea that those that are socially underprivileged can inhabit a privileged epistemic standpoint, where such standpoint is achieved through political engagement.³⁸⁵ Building on the standpoint theory, I will argue that those whose

³⁸² Weaver, M., Thompson, C. and Newton, S. (1991). Gender Constructions in Science. In: P. Frese and J. Coggeshall, ed., *Transcending Boundaries: Multi-disciplinary Approaches to the Study of Gender*. New York: Bergin and Garvey, p. 11.

³⁸³ Smith, D. (1974). Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology. *Sociological Inquiry*, 44(1), p 7.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

³⁸⁵ Hartsock, N. (1983). The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism. In: S. Harding and M. Hintikka, ed., *Discovering Reality Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, 2nd ed. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, pp.283-310.

objective interests are in question – especially those whose interests may be subject to arbitrary interference – possess a special perspective that through engagement creates epistemic privilege.

6.2.3. The Two Criteria for Objective Interests

As noted, hypothetical idealized deliberation gives the criterion by which we can answer the ontological question about whether there is oppression. Drawing on standpoint theory, we can proceed to answer the second question: How can we know whether it is justified to believe there is oppression? I combine the pragmatist account of truth and standpoint theory to introduce the idea of a pragmatist standpoint epistemology.

In aiming towards hypothetical idealized deliberation in the real world, actual deliberation and inquiry should take place, bolstered by as much information as is available to those with the relevant standpoint. Thus, in the real world, the pragmatist inquiry is best pursued with standpoint deliberation. The best approximation in the real world is the deliberation of the people in the relevant standpoint, and that is epistemically privileged over other people's deliberations.

This pragmatist standpoint epistemology is a modified collective version of relying on one ideal observer applied to the hypothetical democratic deliberation and inquiry among the epistemically privileged group of the oppressed. On this account, a justifiable belief about the group's objective interests must be grounded in those interests that the group would settle on at the end of an appropriately informed process of inquiry and deliberation.

The end of inquiry and deliberation by those who are epistemically privileged is what reveals the (provisional) truth about objective interests. Where deliberation and inquiry result in consensus – intersubjective agreement – among the appropriately socially positioned, that ought to determine

objective interests. Where such inquiry or deliberation is impossible, we should instead consider the outcome of a hypothetical deliberation among the epistemically privileged.

This pragmatist standpoint epistemology stipulates that a claim of oppression can be justified if and only if, firstly, the claim is coming from an epistemically privileged social location, and, secondly, there is consensus among those who are similarly situated about the alleged wrong or injustice (or in the absence of actual deliberation, such consensus would be approximated by reference to a hypothetical deliberation among the epistemically privileged). The first criterion is designed to prevent paternalistic coercion, the second is designed to furnish the preferred pragmatist conception of objectivity. Together, the two criteria serve as an epistemic test which offers the best real-world approximation of the hypothetical idealized deliberation.

These two epistemological criteria allow us to test claims of oppression. Anyone might think that others would agree with them at the end of a hypothetical idealized inquiry, but such a belief is only justified if both of our epistemic criteria are met. Otherwise, the belief would be unjustified. For example, if there is no agreement now, then there is not a lot of ground to justify the belief, and even if the claim might be right, there are no grounds for a justified belief. In the next section, we shall take on each criterion in turn, starting with the former.

6.2.3.1. The Epistemic Privilege Criterion

Susceptibility to arbitrary interferences and actually suffering arbitrary interferences are what grants an individual or group of individuals epistemic privilege. Based on the epistemic privilege criterion, the Western feminist's claim that "the hijab is oppressive" can be judged to be an unjustified belief.

Only those who participate in the social practice — insiders — can justify such a claim with a statement like “Our practice of wearing burkas is oppressive.”

By requiring that a claim of oppression be justified only when it emanates from the consciousness of those subjected to unjust norms or social practices or victims of injustice, we can *somewhat* avoid the problem that Berlin and proponents of negative liberty are worried about. Unfortunately, even with the epistemic privilege criterion, we cannot completely avoid paternalism.

Firstly, even if I require that judgments of oppression emanate from the epistemically privileged, acceptance of the idea that there are legitimating social forces working to conceal injustice means such legitimating forces are not deterministic but merely probabilistic. As such, someone could always see through legitimating social forces and make a claim of oppression, even when others who are similarly situated do not see the injustice. Consequently, there could be intra-group paternalism at the inception of the claim of oppression.

Secondly, someone could point out that in introducing a requirement that judgments of oppression emanate from those subjected or liable to arbitrary interference, I could effectively lose the distinction I am trying to draw between this account’s objective conception of interests and Pettit’s subjective one. This requirement could render my conception of interests subjective as well. The epistemic privilege requirement may seem to be tantamount to the mere satisfaction of avowed preferences – the view that Pettit defends.

These two worries have legitimate grounds. The epistemic privilege criterion moves us closer to Pettit’s conception of interests, but, as I shall try to argue, it does not close the gap completely. As I stressed in Chapter 4 (especially, Section 4.2.), Pettit’s reliance on the subjective assessments of those subject or liable to arbitrary interference gives the unfavorable result

that, as Friedman points out, a battered wife who believes her violent husband's beating of her is deserved is not dominated. The task here, therefore, is to articulate a conception of interests that does not fall prey to the objection articulated by Friedman whilst, at the same time, protecting groups from paternalistic abuse, particularly by outsiders.

6.2.3.2. The Consensus Criterion

This is where the second criterion comes into play. In order to justify a claim of oppression, there needs to be some agreement and uptake from others who are similarly socially positioned. It is now necessary to examine exactly what objectivity means in this conception of objective interests. Karl Popper is helpful here because he equates objectivity with intersubjectivity. For him, objectivity does not mean mind-independence; it means intersubjective agreement.³⁸⁶

The two problems that we have are abusive paternalism enabled by a reliance on an objective conception of interests and deformed desires enabled by a reliance on a subjective conception of interests. Those who, like the Western feminist, are confident they have access to objective truths about interests can feel entitled to coercively impose their conception of interests on others who disagree with them. Others who adhere to the subjective account of interests cannot coherently view some battered wives as oppressed. However, if we take objectivity to mean intersubjective agreement, then I am effectively creating a requirement on the part of the moral pioneer to engage with others within the alleged victim group to justify a claim of oppression.

According to Misak, the pragmatist view seems to “have affinities with positions such as ‘deliberative democracy’ and Habermas’ communicative ethics.”³⁸⁷ For the purpose of intersubjective agreement, a necessary

³⁸⁶ See Freeman, E. (1973). Objectivity as “Intersubjective Agreement”. *Monist*, 57(2), pp.168-175 and Popper, K. (1979). *Objective Knowledge*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

³⁸⁷ Misak, C. (2000). *Truth, Politics, Morality*. London: Routledge, p. 5.

ingredient to justify a belief that there is oppression, I rely on the existing literature on deliberative democracy and the accounts of consensus contained therein, like in Jurgen Habermas,³⁸⁸ which is beyond the scope of this project.

Whether intersubjective agreement is to be achieved in the form of consensus from actual deliberation or as the outcome of hypothetical deliberation, we are left with the question: How do we determine the members of the group that must engage in deliberation to attain intersubjective agreement? In the burka example, is it all women, Muslim women, or some other group? According to the structure of this concept of oppression, the group is that collection of individuals, who, by virtue of being members of said group, are subject to arbitrary interference. The vulnerability to the potential harm is what defines the group. In this sense, this criterion for the relevant group is very different from Cudd's, where the relevant group must have an identity independent of the harm.

6.2.4. Objectivity: Hypothetical Deliberation Versus Actual Consensus

With the two criteria introduced above, this new account of oppression becomes susceptible to the kind of objection launched against Cudd. Cudd's account of oppression is exclusionary due to its social group identity requirement. I argued that regardless of whether we interpret Cudd's identity requirement as subjective or objective, her account is exclusionary. If interpreted as a subjective requirement, her account excludes the onset of colonialism and excludes the imposition of unjust policies. If interpreted as an objective requirement, her account excludes the poor.

6.2.4.1. Objection: Lack of Consensus Among the Epistemically Privileged

It seems that the consensus requirement in our pragmatist standpoint epistemology is similar to Cudd's subjective social identity requirement. We

³⁸⁸ Habermas, J. and Fultner, B. (2003). *Truth and Justification*. Cambridge: Polity.

can see this most clearly in the unjust company scenario. Recall that a company, BigCo, imposes an unjust policy on *some* of its employees. Each employee is informed individually and made to sign a non-disclosure agreement. I criticized Cudd's account because given the non-existence of a social group identity, the claim that these employees are oppressed cannot be justified by her standards. Similarly, the objection runs, in the absence of intersubjective consensus among the employees, this account would also not be able to justify the belief that these employees are oppressed.

There are two immediate replies. Firstly, we must acknowledge that the intersubjective consensus requirement for objectivity does allow us to retain some of the benefits of Cudd's account whilst nevertheless avoiding its pitfalls. This is because I maintain that the subjective experiences of the oppressed must always be taken into account. Any plausible account of oppression must engage the consciousness of the oppressed; otherwise, it can license forms of abusive paternalism and, as we have seen, cultural imperialism.

Secondly, this account is not as exclusionary as Cudd's because consensus is a much lower bar than her social identity criterion. At the onset of colonialism, I have the resources to say that consensus among the colonized tribes already existed because they could see themselves as being subjected to arbitrary interference. This account does not require that they share some social identity independent of this harm (as Cudd's account does). When members of different tribes come under the rule of a colonial power, there is immediate consensus that they are being interfered with in a way that does not track their interests. Disparate tribes that do not form a homogenous identity (an identity that can satisfy Cudd's requirement) are not oppressed on her account. Those same tribes, however, *can* form a consensus that they are being arbitrarily interfered with even in the absence of a cohesive social identity. This is sufficient to form a justified belief that the tribes in question are oppressed under this republican theory of oppression.

But what about the BigCo scenario which provided the basis for the objection to a subjective interpretation of Cudd's social identity criterion? How do we determine whether it is justified to call these employees oppressed, given that each individual employee subjected to the unjust policy is made to sign a confidentiality agreement? How can we justifiably believe that they are oppressed when this particular scenario is setup in such a way that they lack the knowledge of their shared harm?

6.2.4.2. Hypothetical Deliberation

In order to address such situations – situations which are not only restricted to the affected employees in the BigCo example but to many other instances of harmful arbitrary interference with a group of individuals – I can further refine the intersubjective consensus requirement. We can say that if the employees of BigCo knew of each other's predicament relative to other employees, then they would agree that they were being subjected to an unjust and oppressive policy. The judgment that the employees are oppressed is epistemically justified to the extent to which belief in this counterfactual claim is epistemically justified, and in this case such a counterfactual seems uncontroversial.

So, perhaps, in cases where members of an allegedly oppressed group, Group B, lack the information about the alleged shared arbitrary interference to which they are subjected, the potential for intersubjective consensus is sufficient for justifiably claiming that a group is oppressed. The detail that the individual employees of BigCo are made to sign a confidentiality agreement can be construed as part of what is oppressive in the BigCo scenario because it prevents them from gaining knowledge of their shared harm. If the employees knew that their individual harm is shared with others, they would have a consensus that the imposition of such a policy is oppressive. In fact, it is plausible that the aim of the non-disclosure agreement is precisely to rob the employees of knowledge of their shared harm. In cases where actual

consensus is elusive due to lack of information (or other impediments to actual deliberation), we can turn instead to a hypothetical democratic deliberation account (wherein all available information is provided), which we shall call *hypothetical deliberation*.

Notice that Cudd's account does not have the resources to say that the BigCo employees are oppressed because it is unlikely that such employees would have a social identity, independent of the harm. The most that they can have is a sense of shared harm — an intersubjective consensus — but it seems implausible to say that an identity independent of the harm existed prior to the harm or that such an identity can develop later.

The proposed account, on the other hand, captures this form of oppression. Moreover, it allows for earlier detection of instances of oppression, which are institutionally protected and largely kept in secret. Consider, for example, the alleged abuses of power by certain influential male academics and Hollywood personalities to exploit women who are aspiring to advance in their respective fields. Prior to the #metoo movement, such cases of arbitrary interference were mostly kept from the public and those that became public were portrayed as examples of bad apples – unsystematic exceptions to the rule. Only after the revelation of endemic prevalence of such abuse through the #metoo movement did this harm attain recognition as oppression. The concept of hypothetical deliberation could help unravel such cases of hidden oppression by asking what the alleged victims would think under the available full information.

6.2.4.3. Actual Consensus as Protection Against Coercive Paternalism

The introduction of hypothetical deliberation opens up this account to an objection of potentially abusive paternalism. A moral pioneer could claim that the group of the allegedly oppressed lacks full information and again

claim, from an Archimedean standpoint, that they have access to what is in the objective interests of others.

Firstly, this account of hypothetical deliberation involves available full information to the extent that it is information about the alleged shared arbitrary interference to which the group is subjected – and not information on what their interests are or ought to be. The potential for consensus can still protect this account from the Western feminist imposing a burka ban. Even if the Western feminist engages burka-wearing women in dialogue, if the latter do not agree with the Western feminist’s judgment, then there is no justification for the claim that it is a case of oppression. Compare this with the BigCo employee who learns that certain others have also been subjected to BigCo’s selectively unjust policy. We can safely assume that each employee would come to a judgment of being subjected to oppression if the employee finds out that others are in a similar predicament to her, thereby justifying the belief that the employees are oppressed. Secondly, it seems plausible that when an epistemically privileged group reaches intersubjective consensus that they are not oppressed, then a claim that the group is oppressed cannot be justified on account of its members’ objective interests.

6.3. Applying Our Concept of Oppression

Now that I have outlined how oppression claims can be justified, let us examine the previously discussed cases through the prism of our pragmatist standpoint epistemology. We will begin by addressing the question of when it is appropriate to use the language of oppression, discussed in the context of two cases, and then proceed to consider other cases.

6.3.1. Mistaken versus Proleptic Use of the Language of Oppression

Let us turn to the case of the abolished Chinese practice of foot binding. We can see the role of intersubjective agreement in identifying and overcoming

oppression by looking at how the Chinese practice of foot binding was abolished. The sociologist Gerry Mackie studied how female foot binding in China was abolished in a single generation despite the practice being around for 1,000 years.³⁸⁹ Initially, there were Manchurian conquerors — outsiders — who tried to abolish the practice through punishment and penalties. Because there was no intersubjective consensus that the practice was oppressive among Chinese women, the punishments and penalties of the Manchurian conquerors could be viewed themselves as coercive and oppressive. Moreover, they were ineffective, and the practice endured.

But after the Manchurian conquerors failed to eradicate the practice, insiders to the practice also took issue with it. As such, several anti-foot binding societies were formed amongst insiders, using the “effective technique of pledging members not to bind their daughters nor let sons marry bound women.”³⁹⁰ This movement led to the recognition of the practice among the insiders as oppressive and eventually to its eradication. The anti-foot binding societies engaged in deliberation and education of the public, “propagand[izing] the disadvantages of foot binding in Chinese cultural terms, promot[ing] pledge associations, and subtly convey[ing] international disapproval of the custom.”³⁹¹ While the initial idea may have come from outsiders, it is through intersubjective agreement among the epistemically privileged group that the practice was eradicated.

We could say, according to our pragmatist standpoint epistemology of objective interests, that in the case of Chinese foot binding deliberation actually took place and achieved consensus. It is not the idealized version, but it approaches it more closely than the alternatives, and this helps to justify the belief that the practice was oppressive.

³⁸⁹ Mackie, G. (1996). Ending Footbinding and Infibulation: A Convention Account. *American Sociological Review*, 61(6), p. 999-1017.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1001.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*

One may say that, at the start of this process, there was a proleptic use of the language of oppression.³⁹² Although the judgment that foot binding is an unjust and cruel practice *initially* came from outsiders to the practice, there was significant uptake from those affected by the practice. And, though claims of oppression were initially unjustified since the claim did not come from those who are epistemically privileged and there was no intersubjective consensus among the allegedly oppressed, the fact that the people against the practice engaged with insiders of the practice made persuasion and education possible.

This is the sense in which moral pioneers, including outsiders who saw the practice as unjust, could be said to have used the language of oppression proleptically, where the initially unjustified claim of oppression functioned to enlighten, educate, and achieve consensus among insiders of the practice. Objectivity understood as intersubjective agreement was achieved on the issue of foot binding. The proleptic use of the language of oppression enabled recognition and eradication of the oppressive practice. In the end, “the leadership of the Natural Foot Society was transferred to a committee of Chinese women”³⁹³ and the practice was abolished.

Let us now turn to the case of the burka-wearing women. Notice that a Western feminist who is against the burka could profess to a similarly proleptic use of the language of oppression. In order to have a justified belief that the burka is oppressive, we need to know whether it is an arbitrary interference with the burka-wearing women’s objective interests. According to our pragmatist standpoint epistemology of objective interests, in the absence of consensus we must determine what would be the outcome of the idealized deliberation. The best method for doing so is to get the subject group to deliberate. On the subject of the burka, such deliberation is yet to take place in any conclusive way, and certainly consensus that it is oppressive remains

³⁹² I thank Michael Garnett for this point.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 1001.

elusive. What some Western feminists imagine as an outcome is not a good approximation since they stand outside the appropriate social location; a good approximation would be rendered by actual deliberation among the epistemically privileged.

Therefore, if the Western feminist is claiming that it is a fact that burka-wearing women are oppressed because of their burka practice, that claim is unjustified in the absence of an intersubjective consensus amongst the epistemically privileged group, the burka-wearing women. If, on the other hand, the Western feminist is claiming that burka-wearing women are oppressed to *create* awareness and consensus among the burka-wearing women of their circumstances, that would be a proleptic use of the language of oppression.

Moreover, where the language is not used proleptically, and the conditions of oppression have not been met, one cannot simply posit that there is oppression on the basis of an unsupported claim of hypothetical idealized deliberation. For example, given that women are protesting against the banning of the burka, an attempt by Murray or others to claim that the burka is oppressive on the basis of consensus from hypothetical idealized deliberation will have no basis. This allows us to say that the coercive banning of the burka is a Western imperialistic act because there is no intersubjective consensus among burka-wearing women that they are victims of an oppressive social practice.

It is important to recognize that proleptic use of the language of oppression can succeed or fail. Intuitively, external proleptic use is less likely to succeed, whereas internal proleptic use is more likely to succeed, but whether or not this is the case is ultimately an empirical question. In practice, there is a fine line between external proleptic use of the language of oppression to create consensus and cultural imperialism. There is no way to tell in advance which proleptic uses will succeed and which will fail, and the process of

achieving consensus through education and persuasion is always in danger of becoming cultural imperialism through excessive coercion.

Another relevant factor in the determination of whether the use of the language is proleptic or culturally imperialistic is the hierarchy between insiders and outsiders. Not only are Western feminists, like Terri Murray, outsiders to the practice of wearing burkas, they are also from a more dominant culture than the culture of burka-wearing Muslim women. As such, we need to be sensitive to the socially situated origin of the claim, lest our conception of objectivity function as a legitimating tool to advance the interests and conception of the good of more dominant individuals and groups.

6.3.2. Revisiting Other Cases of Oppression

In addition to the practices of Chinese foot binding and the wearing of the burka, we also previously addressed other cases of potential oppression, some of which we will revisit here. Let us return to the issue of whether a requirement of epistemic privilege would foreclose the possibility of calling a battered wife who deems herself deserving of her husband's beatings oppressed. I have the resources to say that we have a justified belief that the woman is oppressed even though she does not think so because there is sufficient consensus among wives, including those who have been subjected to physical abuse by their husbands, that wife battery is wrong and unjust. Unlike the case of the burka, where hundreds of women in Denmark have participated in a protest against the banning of the burka, there is no group, and therefore also no group of wives, lobbying for the right of women to be beaten by their husbands.

There is intersubjective agreement that wife-beating is wrong, even though there are still wives who think they deserve their husbands' beating. This means that once an issue has achieved a sufficient form of intersubjective epistemic consensus, I can say that a reasonable level of epistemic

justification has been achieved. Even if we limit the standpoint to the group of women who are battered wives, it is likely that deliberation would determine that the practice is oppressive, an arbitrary interference with the interests of the women subjected to it. For this reason, I can say that wife-beating is against the objective interests of women, and, concomitantly, that the woman who believes she deserves her husband's beating is oppressed and suffering from internalized oppression.

Let us return also to the case of the colonization of indigenous people of the Philippines. As in the cases above, our judgment about whether the case of colonization is oppressive depends on whether it is an arbitrary interference with the indigenous people's objective interests. According to the pragmatist standpoint epistemology of objective interests, in the absence of consensus, we have to determine what would be the outcome of the idealized deliberation. The best approximation to that – which gets us closest to the truth – results from the subject group's deliberation. As noted, many Filipinos view the colonization and the various consequences thereof as arbitrary interferences with the interests of the native inhabitants.

In the context of this case, one could ask whether it is only people of the Philippines who are in the position to address this question or other colonized peoples, too? Is the relevant identity colonized person or is each case unique? Returning to our discussion of what the appropriate group is, if the question concerns the colonization of the Philippines, then only the people of the Philippines represent the epistemically privileged group, and if the question concerns colonization in general, then it is all colonized peoples in the world.

Let us also return to the case of the BigCo and its unjust policy. As in the cases above, in order to have a justified belief that the policy is oppressive, we need to know whether it is an arbitrary interference with the employees' objective interests. According to our pragmatist standpoint epistemology of

objective interests, in the absence of actual consensus, which is precluded by the confidentiality agreement, we have to determine what would be the outcome of the hypothetical deliberation. If people in the correct standpoint were to deliberate, what conclusion would they come to? The outcome of such inquiry quite obviously show that the policy arbitrarily interferes with the objective interests of the employees subjected to it.

The examples above illustrate how through an actual or hypothetical idealized deliberative process within the epistemically privileged group, the collective can either achieve consensus or not on objective interests, as is the case, for example, with the foot binding and the burkas, respectively.

6.3.3. Not All Collective Harm or Harmful Social Practices Are Oppressive

One could argue that an obvious alternative criterion to establish objective interests is overt harm, which is what Clare Chambers uses in her argument for a state prohibition on breast implants.³⁹⁴ Foot binding severely impaired the mobility of those subjected to it and “complications included ulceration, paralysis, gangrene, and mortification of the lower limbs,”³⁹⁵ whereas there is no overt, physical comparable harm in wearing burkas.

However, the notion of overt harm, even physical harm, cannot be considered in a vacuum. One could argue that athletes subject themselves to the risk of injury and long-term health problems to achieve their aims in sport. One could argue that scholars, sitting in front of books and computers, subject their eyesight to harm. The subjective and objective interests of individuals and groups underlying what efforts, risks, and sacrifices, and therefore also harms, they choose to subject themselves to is a far more complex matter than the mere degree of the overt harm. Not all social practices that are harmful need

³⁹⁴ Chambers, C. (2009). *Sex, Culture, and Justice: The Limits of Choice*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

³⁹⁵ Mackie, G. (1996). Ending Footbinding and Infibulation: A Convention Account. *American Sociological Review*, 61(6), p. 1000.

to be counted as cases of oppression. In the examples above, there would not be intersubjective agreement among the epistemically privileged that they are oppressed.

6.4. Summary of the Epistemology of Oppression

We began this chapter by asking how we can make a justified judgment that there is oppression. I acknowledged that the use of the language of oppression can sometimes license cultural imperialism and used colonization and Western feminism as examples. As such, I introduced the pragmatist standpoint epistemology with two criteria to protect our account from paternalistic abuse and coercion.

The pragmatist account of truth is grounded in experience and holds that truth is that best belief that results at the end of inquiry. Marxists and standpoint feminists posit that those who are victims of an injustice are best positioned to understand the injustice. Drawing on these perspectives, the pragmatist standpoint epistemology was introduced for determining objective interests. Two criteria were outlined for a claim of arbitrary interference with objective interests: the epistemic privilege criterion and the consensus criterion.

The first restricts the validity of claims of oppression by specifying that only insiders or those directly affected by the issue can justify claims of oppression. The second criterion, the intersubjective consensus criterion, is designed to furnish us with a particular understanding of the objectivity of interests. Relatedly, this criterion is used to create the requirement of dialogue and deliberation because that is the only way to achieve consensus. These two criteria allow us to overcome the risk of abusive paternalism inherent in objective accounts of interests while, at the same time, addressing concerns of false consciousness inherent in subjective accounts of interests.

It was acknowledged that these requirements made this new account of oppression more similar to Pettit's and Cudd's, but important differences remain. Where Pettit cannot help but be committed to the view that a battered wife who thinks she deserves her husband's beating is not oppressed, the intersubjective consensus that wife-battery is wrong means that the new account can hold that all battered wives are oppressed even if there are still individual wives who disagree.

An objection to Cudd was then redeployed. Is the new account susceptible to a similar complaint? The BigCo scenario was used to show that the potential of intersubjective consensus might sometimes be sufficient to substantiate a judgment of oppression, whereas it does not seem likely that a subset of employees subjected to an unjust policy in a particular company would and could develop a social group identity independent of the harm they suffer. Having now specified the requirements for a justified claim of oppression, we are in a better position to investigate how to understand responsibility for and how to overcome situations of oppression.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Responsibility for Oppression

7. Responsibility for Oppression

According to Marilyn Friedman, “a policy of punishing men for individual acts of dominating women will be *insufficient* [italics added] to bring male domination to an end. Male domination as a social problem is not merely the aggregated result of individual men engaging in acts of domination of individual women.”³⁹⁶ The word “insufficient” is emphasized because this statement acknowledges the dual nature of oppression. This two-pronged unified account of oppression allows for a more comprehensive allocation of responsibility for oppression. Unlike Young who, as we shall see, seems to think that the only way in which oppressive states of affairs can be ameliorated is through institutional changes via political activism, my account of oppression has prescriptions for both the institutional and the interactional aspects of oppression. Like Young, I believe that political activism is one of the ways in which a person can fulfill her moral duties to the oppressed and her obligation to repair unjust institutions. Unlike Young, I hope to show that there is an interactional dimension to oppression, which is just as important to address.

Oppression occurs when Agent A, *qua* member of social Group A, can arbitrarily interfere with Agent B, *qua* member of Group B, and agents in Group A exercise this capacity, which results in harm to some members in Group B. Because some cases might satisfy this definition whilst violating our intuitions about what counts as oppression, a threshold was added. This agent-based definition of oppression presupposes a background of unjust distribution of capacities or what is sometimes called *structural oppression*. As such,

³⁹⁶ Friedman, M. (2008). Pettit's Civic Republicanism and Male Domination. In: C. Laborde and J. Maynor, ed., *Republicanism and Political Theory*, 1st ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

oppression as an action occurs on the *interactional* level of human relations and constitutes an *institutional* arrangement.

Oppression is a morally-loaded term. When we talk about responsibility for oppression, the type of responsibility that is of primary importance is moral responsibility. Given the structural or institutional origin of oppression, there are many individuals, groups, institutions, and practices that *causally* contribute to oppression. Unless an individual lives in total isolation, it is likely that she is, in some way, causally participating in the production and reproduction of oppression. Mere participation in practices that reinforce the status quo can be construed as a causal contribution to oppression. But mere causal contribution is insufficient for grounding moral responsibility. In order to convert causal responsibility into moral responsibility, some level of culpability is required.

For the purposes of this discussion, I shall assume a basic compatibilist account of moral responsibility, which requires a form of control or freedom condition, plus a knowledge and awareness condition, in addition to the causal contribution.³⁹⁷ The freedom condition is satisfiable whenever an agent faces options or viable alternative courses of action. The knowledge condition is satisfiable whenever an agent has sufficient awareness or should be aware of the moral feature of an action. Sometimes, foresight is all that is needed to justify a claim of moral responsibility.

In proceeding with this analysis, I will begin by introducing three main distinctions. Then, we shall look into Young's primarily institutional conception of responsibility and discuss its failings. We shall then examine how these distinctions function in theorizing about responsibility for oppression. The analysis will end with a brief discussion of the role of the state.

³⁹⁷ McKenna, Michael and Coates, D. Justin, "Compatibilism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/compatibilism/> [accessed 19 June 2019].

7.1. Useful Distinctions

The first and most important distinction here is drawn from the two domains viable for moral assessment: the institutional and the interactional.³⁹⁸ These two domains have corresponding prescriptions on the actions and behaviors of moral agents: *political* responsibility and *interactional* responsibility.

One way to understand the institutional domain is to recognize that whenever some agents have the capacity to arbitrarily interfere with individuals in a group, such capacities are a result of a social structure or institutional arrangement. As such, members of political associations, for instance, share collective responsibility for the repair or abolition of unjust institutions, practices, and social arrangements. Such collective responsibility has an unavoidable, individualistic moral feature in this conception of political responsibility. Though the responsibility for the repair and abolition of unjust institutions is collective, such collective responsibility is divisible among and devolves to the individuals and agents who make up the collective. Collective responsibility bottoms out in each individual doing their part to address the injustice.

Moving on to the interactional realm, we, as individual agents, have a moral responsibility not to arbitrarily interfere with others in a culpable manner. We, as individual agents, have a duty to track the interests of the individuals that we interact with. By subjecting the interactional domain to moral

³⁹⁸ On p. 314 of Haslanger, H. (2013). *Oppressions: Racial and Other*. In S. Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Haslanger alludes to this distinction when she says that “In cases of agent oppression, the focus is on individuals or groups and their actions; it is the job of our best moral theory to tell us when the action in question is wrong. In cases of structural oppression, the focus is on our collective arrangements – our institutions, policies, and practices – and a theory of justice should provide the normative evaluation of the wrong.”

assessment, we can draw normative prescriptions for an individual agent's direct interaction with others.

The second distinction relates to the nature of responsibility for oppression, namely, responsibility for creating a state of affairs where oppression persists and responsibility for rectifying situations of oppression. The former is backward-looking because it considers how an oppressive situation came into being. This backward-looking responsibility is not always immediately moral. It is possible (albeit unlikely) that responsibility for oppression in this backward-looking sense could be purely causal. The latter is forward-looking; it asks the question of on whom the duty to rectify situations of oppression falls. In contrast to the backward-looking conception, the forward-looking perspective is always moral for the duty to improve conditions of injustice, which falls on individuals, has an irreducible moral component.

These two perspectives, the backward-looking and the forward-looking, are applicable to the institutional and the interactional domains. When we ask who is responsible for oppression in the backward-looking sense, we could be asking one of two things: (1) who is responsible for creating a situation wherein an oppressive state of affairs persists or exists (a question about institutional oppression), or (2) who culpably exercised her/his social group-based capacity for arbitrary interference over someone *qua* member of a social group (a question about interactional oppression)? If we consider the forward-looking, we could be asking one of two things: (1) who are the agents responsible for remedying the oppressive state of affairs (a question about institutional oppression), or (2) who has the duty to refrain from the exercise of her or his group-based capacity for arbitrary interference (a question about interactional oppression)? We shall return to these questions below.

The final distinction relevant to thinking about responsibility for oppression is between acts and omissions. More specifically, because

oppression has a non-reducible moral feature, we are concerned with culpable actions and culpable omissions. This is another complicated and problematic area in moral philosophy: the distinction between an action and an omission is powerfully unclear (as the literature on the distinction between doing and allowing demonstrates).³⁹⁹ However, for the purposes of this work, we can proceed with the more or less accepted conjecture that harmful actions are often worse than harmful omissions. A common way in which this distinction has been couched in the literature is that killing is worse than letting die.⁴⁰⁰

For present purposes, let us say that an individual could be considered culpable when they had a duty to act or not act in a certain way. Remember, however, that oppression is a continuum and that a more decisive factor in determining whether someone is more or less oppressed is the harm that a person or a social group suffers. What this means is that there can be cases where omissions cause more harm than actions, as shall be discussed below. As such, though the distinction between culpable acts and culpable omissions play a role in determining the severity of the oppression and the corresponding weight of the responsibility, the harm condition plays a more decisive one.

With these three distinctions, the ground is cleared for the discussion of responsibility for oppression. We can now turn to Young's account of responsibility, describable as primarily institutional and forward-looking.

7.2. Young's Social Connection Model of Responsibility

Chapter Five ended with the claim that there is theoretical unity and continuity between Young's *Five Faces of Oppression* and this new republican, univocal concept of oppression. But whilst there is no tension between

³⁹⁹ Woollard, Fiona and Howard-Snyder, Frances, "Doing vs. Allowing Harm", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/doing-allowing/>.

⁴⁰⁰ Frowe, H. (2007) Killing John to save Mary: A Defence of the Moral Distinction Between Killing and Letting Die. In: Campbell, J., O'Rourke, M. and Silverstein, H. (eds.) *Topics in Contemporary Philosophy: Action, Ethics and Responsibility*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Young's account of what oppression is and this new republican theory of oppression, there are some problems with how Young understands responsibility for oppression. One weakness of Young's account is that individual agency is not given sufficient weight. Her focus on oppression as a collective problem is at the cost of marginalizing the role of agents and agential actions in contexts of oppression. An awareness of the interactional aspect of oppression is missing in her analysis. One point where this problem manifests is in her view that there can be knowledge of oppression without culpability. This view is, additionally, in tension with her own commitment to the idea that oppression is an injustice.

In her posthumously published book, *Responsibility for Justice*, Young defends what she calls a forward-looking conception of responsibility, which she calls *A Social Connection Model*. For Young, responsibility for oppression is forward-looking in the sense that it asks the question of what should be done given unjust circumstances. Instead of asking the question of how and why some people are oppressed, which is backward-looking, Young argues that we must focus on the future and how to improve unjust situations. Adopting a forward-looking conception of responsibility allows us to avoid getting snarled up in the details of who did what and avoids the language of blame and culpability.

She states that “[t]he language of blame in political debates... often impedes discussion that will end in collective action, because it expresses a spirit of resentment, produces defensiveness, or focuses people more on themselves than on the social relations they should be trying to change.”⁴⁰¹ She construes the responsibility of resolving or ameliorating conditions of oppression as a political and not a moral responsibility and argues that individuals are politically obliged to join others who are making a collective effort to address oppressive conditions. In fact, she argues that responsibility

⁴⁰¹ Young, I. (2013). *Responsibility for Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 114.

for structural injustice can only be discharged by joining with others in collective action.⁴⁰²

Significantly, Young seems primarily motivated by instrumental considerations in her account of responsibility. Young believes that the problem of oppression is too complex for any single person to make a structural or significant difference, so she thinks blaming individuals is pointless. More importantly, she believes that the language of blame and culpability likely activates feelings of defensiveness given that, in at least some cases, no single person could be viewed as having, in a strict sense, intended the oppressive circumstances. As such, Young is insistent that oppression could occur and be known without any culpability, and this view has been widely influential amongst those concerned with oppression.⁴⁰³

On our republican account of oppression, it is strictly speaking possible for there to be oppression without any culpability. This would be the case were the oppression is unknown. We say oppression exists whenever there are two groups of agents, Group A and Group B, where agents in Group A have the capacity to arbitrarily interfere with agents in Group B, by virtue of their respective group memberships, and some agents in Group A exercise the capacity. As such, this is an ontological criterion for oppression. In the previous chapter, *The Epistemology of Oppression*, we saw how the question of knowledge of oppression is separable from the question about the existence of oppression.

⁴⁰² On p. 105 of Young, I. (2013). *Responsibility for Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, she writes that “Responsibility under the social connection model is essentially shared. It can therefore be discharged only through collective action.” Again, on p. 111, Young argues that “responsibility can be discharged only by joining with others in collective action.”

⁴⁰³ Haslanger is a case in point. In Haslanger, H. (2013). *Oppressions: Racial and Other*. In S. Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Haslanger argues that there can be knowledge of oppression where we cannot find “a moral failing — [in the] acts and attitudes — of an agent” (on p. 320) and that “tracing a wrong back to an agent may not be possible” (on p. 319).

However, whilst it is conceptually possible for oppression to exist without anyone knowing about it, it is practically highly unlikely. Once knowledge of oppression is acquired, it automatically follows that there are agents responsible for removing or alleviating the oppressive circumstances. A failure to remove or alleviate oppressive conditions means that there are culpable agents. But because Young's claim is not simply that oppression can exist without culpability but that there can be *knowledge* of the existence of oppression without culpability, there is something amiss with her account. Young's claim is not simply about the existence of oppression but about knowledge as well because of her view that the homeless or those threatened with homelessness are oppressed even though there is no one culpable for their oppression. We shall call this the *No-Fault View* of oppression.

7.2.1. Conceptual Incoherence: Injustice without Culpability

According to Young, "we should not be blamed or found at fault for the injustice we contribute to."⁴⁰⁴ Despite being well-motivated, her account of responsibility for oppression is, in the end, incoherent. As Martha Nussbaum has pointed out, there is something amiss with Young's insistence that oppression could occur without culpability.⁴⁰⁵ Though Young makes the important point that oppression could occur without any explicitly bad intention, once a claim of injustice has been justified, it would be conceptually incoherent to say there is no one at fault if the oppression persists. Young's *No-Fault View* does not capture the whole picture of what is going on when we make claims of oppression.

All claims of oppression are simultaneously claims of injustice. A claim of injustice means that there are or ought to be agents responsible for alleviating the situation. We make a conceptual error if like Young, we condemn a situation as unjust but are unwilling to hold agents and the relevant

⁴⁰⁴ Young, I. (2013). *Responsibility for Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 143.

⁴⁰⁵ See Martha Nussbaum's foreword in Young, I. (2013). *Responsibility for Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press.

institutions responsible for changing it and, correspondingly, culpable for failing to change it. Of course, once the relevant time passes, those who were held responsible but failed to take action could and, perhaps more importantly, should be held culpably negligent or culpably indifferent.⁴⁰⁶

This is where Young's conception of responsibility becomes tenuous. She fails to fully appreciate that social structures are dependent on individuals, and failures to partake in her forward-looking conception of responsibility for oppression are culpable failures of individual action. As Cohen argues in *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*, our political beliefs and commitments have or should have personal or behavioral implications because "personal attitude and choice are... the stuff of which social structure itself is made."⁴⁰⁷ The fact that it is still individual agents who must act in order to improve conditions of oppression means that, at the end of the day, failures to alleviate or remove oppressive circumstances are failures of individual moral agency.

If no one could be held responsible for changing the situation or culpable for failing to change the situation, then it cannot be called an injustice. It cannot be called oppression. There is no denying that *disadvantage* can be an unintended and unforeseen consequence of social organization. If the disadvantage is justified in some way, then perhaps the disadvantage is merely a fact of life that must be accepted. It does not matter how much horrible suffering is brought about by the death of an elderly person. There is no injustice there because human beings are finite mortals, and no amount of human suffering can make it the case that it is unjust that the elderly die. But if the disadvantage is, for some reason, unjustified, then knowledge of the unjust disadvantage creates a responsibility to remove the disadvantage or otherwise change the situation of injustice. Such responsibility is likely to be

⁴⁰⁶ Martha Nussbaum's foreword in Young, I. (2013). *Responsibility for Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. xxi.

⁴⁰⁷ Cohen, G. (2009). *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. x.

some form of collective or shared responsibility, which must eventually be enacted by individuals. Individuals are responsible for doing their part in the collective responsibility of correcting an injustice. If no one is responsible and culpable for addressing an unfortunate event, claims of injustice are chimerical or merely rhetorical.

For these reasons, Young's *No-Fault View* is unsatisfying and incoherent. Insofar as she is willing to hold agents responsible for alleviating conditions of oppression and injustice, she ought to also be willing to hold them culpable if and when they fail to do their part. As Young herself acknowledges, there will always be responsible individuals or agents for correcting an injustice.⁴⁰⁸ But insofar as we want to preserve the view that oppression is a form of injustice, she must also accept that culpability follows from failures to take up responsibilities for the alleviation or eradication of oppressive circumstances.

7.2.2. Justice and the Reasonable Expectation to Act

In Young's defense, one could propose a case for non-culpability under the condition that it is not morally reasonable to take remedial action. In other words, the condition implies, per the above, that there is good reason for someone not to do her or his part in alleviating conditions of oppression.

After all, agents who fail to do what they are duty-bound to do are responsible for an omission. However, when such responsibility is ascribed, there is an underlying assessment about whether it is reasonable to expect an agent to act, under the given circumstances. In other words, there is a threshold of reasonable expectation for any action. An agent can only be assigned blame if the bar for the required action is low enough that they can be reasonably expected to take the action. For example, saving a drowning

⁴⁰⁸ On p. 95 of Young, I. (2013). *Responsibility for Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, she writes that "the very judgment that there is injustice implies some kind of responsibility."

child in a shallow pond sets the bar sufficiently low. On the contrary, saving a drowning child in a deep-sea festering with hungry sharks may set the bar too high.

In order to show that knowledge of oppression could occur without culpability, Young invites us to consider the case of Sandy, a single mother of two, who is on the brink of homelessness. The centrally-located apartment that Sandy was renting was bought by developers, who offered her money to relocate. Sandy was initially enthusiastic about the opportunity, but, due to a series of unfortunate events, she is now facing a real threat of homelessness. Young constructs the scenario in such a way that none of the people with whom Sandy interacted could be said to have wronged her. Young even adds that the rental agent went out of his way to try and help Sandy find a home that she could afford. As such, all the individuals with whom Sandy interacted were kind and helpful and therefore cannot be called oppressors or culpable for Sandy's predicament.⁴⁰⁹ Sandy is oppressed, but she was neither wronged nor harmed by anyone she interacted with. Young is therefore able to make a case for why there can be oppressed people where there are no oppressors or those culpable for the situation.

Even if we grant Young that there can be instances of injustice that do not involve interactional harms, this is not the only way in which individuals living in unjust societies can be rendered culpable, even on Young's own account. As Young herself notes in her *Social Connection Model of Responsibility*, everyone in society is partly responsible for alleviating conditions of injustice. So even if everyone that Sandy interacted with had tried her or his best to help, the minute Sandy becomes homeless, everyone is implicated in the injustice of her homelessness. Sandy lives in a society where hardworking people can be rendered homeless, so the state and its citizens could all be charged with culpable indifference with regards to the plight of the homeless.

⁴⁰⁹ Young, I. (2013). *Responsibility for Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 43-44.

Culpability for inaction is not a novel concept in philosophy, and likewise exists in the law. In the law, culpability is established on the basis of responsibility for action or inaction. For example, the legal duty of care, based on law often grounded in moral duties, establishes a legal requirement to act, and failure to act is a violation of that law. Young, via her *Social Connection Model*, holds that we have a collective responsibility to take action to alleviate Sandy's condition. However, there appears to be an incoherence in a conception that holds, on the one hand, that agents have the responsibility to take action as a matter of justice and yet, on the other hand, simultaneously also holds that failing to take that action does not render the agents culpable.

We can see further evidence of this incoherence in Young's characterization of Sandy's situation. She uses Sandy's story as an illustration of structural injustice and states that she has "constructed Sandy's story... so that it does not involve harms of individual interaction."⁴¹⁰ However, she simultaneously states that "when we judge that structural injustice exists, we are saying precisely that at least some of the normal and accepted background conditions of action are not morally acceptable."⁴¹¹ If some of the background conditions of action are not "morally acceptable," then how can it be the case that no one has wronged Sandy? Young cannot have it both ways. She cannot be committed to the view that no one has wronged Sandy whilst simultaneously believing that the norms and rules governing Sandy's interactions are "not morally acceptable." In the final instance, the state and state officials could be held accountable for their failure to provide institutional mechanisms that protect tenants from homelessness.

Consequently, one notable outcome of Young's account is that many instances of injustice might be rendered *de facto* acceptable. People may believe that Sandy's predicament is an injustice and that something should be

⁴¹⁰ Young, I. (2013). *Responsibility for Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 46.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

done about it, but each person feels individually exculpated from taking any such action, thereby effectively allowing oppression to persist. Returning to our discussion about the responsibility for omission, one could argue that the bar for any one individual to take any further action to alleviate Sandy's condition is too high. This, in turn, renders Sandy's plight *de facto* acceptable.

To be clear, Young is committed to the view that everyone should be participating in collective action to alleviate conditions of oppression. The problem arises from the fact that she is withholding ascriptions of culpability — on instrumental grounds — which means that those who do not participate in collective action are immune to blame. Moreover, Young has not provided us with an explicit criterion for culpability. There is little consensus among theorists about how demanding the requirements of justice are. For a thoroughgoing egalitarian, there is always a duty to help those in need so long as doing so will not render the person helping worse off than the person being helped. The idea that many relational egalitarians push for is that the threshold requiring agents to act is much higher when injustice is so rampant and pervasive. For example, in *The Demandingness of Morality: Toward a Reflective Equilibrium*, Brian Berkey argues that given the unjust state of our world, the demands of morality are much more stringent than is commonly accepted.⁴¹² In practice, however, oftentimes the perception that the bar is too high renders many injustices to be *de facto* acceptable.

The concept of oppression allows for a more rigorous approach to determining where the bar is or ought to be. When there is knowledge of oppression, the bar ought to be set to such a level as would allow for the injustice to be eliminated. If a society has the ability to provide shelter for all and yet there is homelessness, the interests of the members of the homeless group are not being tracked by the rest of society. They are oppressed, and the bar ought to be such that members of society are expected to act to

⁴¹² Berkey, B. (2016). *The Demandingness of Morality: Toward a Reflective Equilibrium*. *Philosophical Studies*, 173(11), pp.3015-3035.

counter this oppression. It cannot be right, even if socially accepted, for members of one group to be reasonably excused while members of another group incur harm that could be eliminated through action of members of the former group. People who believe that the homeless are oppressed or that homelessness is an injustice should feel guilty if they are not doing anything about the injustice they perceive whenever they walk past a rough sleeper.

In this conception of oppression, everyone who knows that the *status quo* systemically disadvantages certain individuals (where such disadvantages are avoidable) is culpable for failing to do their part to remedy an injustice. In the final instance, the state and state officials could be held accountable for their failure to provide institutional mechanisms that protect, for example, tenants from homelessness. We shall return to the role of the state later.

7.2.3. The Utility of Guilt and Blame

There is another reason why we ought to hold agents culpable for their failures to do their part in alleviating conditions of oppression. Young claims that the language of blame and culpability are likely to activate defensiveness. But one might equally claim that blaming individuals for failing to do their part in alleviating injustice can activate feelings of guilt or pity. Activating feelings of guilt or pity can motivate people into the right kind of action. When environmental activist Greta Thunberg was asked about how she convinced her parents to become vegan, she said, “I made them feel guilty.”⁴¹³

Likewise, consider the current trend of charity advertising in the developed world for children who are victims of war or severe poverty in far off places. Whilst such advertising usually comes with facts (for example, your £2 can buy them food for a week), such aid advertisements rely primarily on evoking emotions of pity, guilt, or empathy with its use of e.g. distressing

⁴¹³ Silberman, S. (2019). Greta Thunberg became a climate activist not in spite of her autism, but because of it. *Vox*. [online] Available at: <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2019/5/6/18531551/autism-greta-thunberg-speech> [Accessed 14 Jul. 2019].

images. When political activists raise awareness about the plight of the global poor, they also often stress disparity between our privilege and the scarcity that the global poor suffer. Half the global population subsists on less than \$2 a day PPP, and \$2 is what we, in the developed world, sometimes spend on half a cup of coffee. Stressing this discrepancy is meant to activate feelings of pity, guilt, and empathy.

Susan James argues that moral emotions are an important resource in the pursuit of justice, especially when we are invested in realizing our theories.⁴¹⁴ Similarly, Cohen argues that “for inequality to be overcome, there needs to be a revolution in feeling or motivation, as opposed to (just) in [social] structure.”⁴¹⁵ If Peter Strawson gets something correct in his claim that morality is constituted by our reactive attitudes towards each other,⁴¹⁶ then we must be willing to hold those who fail to fulfill their political responsibilities as culpable agents.

In any case, it is not clear that the act of holding someone responsible is actually separable from having reactive attitudes towards that person. Our responsibility practices cannot be divorced from – and are at least partly constituted by – the relevant moral emotions and reactive attitudes. When we hold each other and ourselves to blame for failing to remedy injustice, we are laying the groundwork for how we can move other agents and ourselves to action.

7.3. The Two Domains of Responsibility for Oppression

We now return to the previously identified two domains of responsibility for oppression and propose a more comprehensive view than Young’s. We

⁴¹⁴ James, S. (2003). XIII. Passion and Politics. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 52, pp.221-234.

⁴¹⁵ Cohen, G. (2009). *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 120.

⁴¹⁶ Strawson, P. (1974). *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*. London: Methuen, pp.1-25.

shall examine responsibility in the institutional domain, both from a forward-looking and a backward-looking perspective. We shall then examine responsibility for oppression in the interactional domain, also considering the two perspectives.

7.3.1. Institutional Domain of Responsibility for Oppression

Young's *Social Connection Model* deals with the institutional domain and is concerned only with forward-looking responsibility. But, as I shall argue, there is an institutional backward-looking perspective that can guide us in gaining a richer understanding of the complexities surrounding responsibility for oppression.

7.3.1.1. Institutional Forward-Looking Responsibility for Oppression

Let us start with Young's *Social Connection Model*. It is a forward-looking, institutional account which asks on whom the duty to rectify falls. When we apply the forward-looking perspective to the institutional domain, we are asking the question of who is responsible for alleviating or removing the injustice. The answer, according to Young, is everybody. She writes that "individuals bear responsibility for structural injustice because they contribute by their actions to the processes that produce unjust outcomes."⁴¹⁷

Young does not think that individuals *qua* individuals can make contributions to the improvement of oppressive states of affairs. Individuals *qua* individuals can only resist oppression when they join others in collective action. She argues that individuals have "an obligation to join with others who share that responsibility in order to transform the structural processes to make their outcomes less unjust."⁴¹⁸ This way of conceiving of responsibility for oppression has the benefit of not overburdening individuals. As such, it is likely

⁴¹⁷ Young, I. (2011). *Responsibility for Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 105.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

to be agreeable to many people, which makes it a realizable conception of responsibility. Instead of requiring individuals to shelter homeless people in their own homes, what is required is for individuals to work towards a collective or institutional solution for the problem of homelessness.

Young is an advocate of grassroots collective action. Given her view that oppression can be mundane and systemic, she thinks that the only way in which ordinary individuals can discharge their forward-looking responsibility to improve conditions of institutional oppression is through political activism. Though Young is committed to the idea that oppression requires structural changes, she has a bottom-up approach. She seems convinced that the best way in which we can improve oppressive situations is not by people on the top — powerful people — making policy changes and other structural-type remedies but by ordinary individuals joining together in collective action and demanding structural changes. Young is not concerned with how people acquire responsibility to rectify situations of oppression. For her, being a participant and member of an unjust society is sufficient for grounding responsibility for oppression.

Young focuses on this forward-looking perspective probably because she thinks that “it is not possible to identify how the actions of one particular individual, or even one particular collective agent, such as a firm, has directly produced harm to other specific individuals.”⁴¹⁹ Given the institutional and structural aspect of oppression, some forms of causal contributions are difficult to measure, track, quantify, or even identify.

For instance, feminists assert that we live in a patriarchal world, where most local societies are markedly patriarchal. Whilst there are clear cases of female oppression from an agential or interactional perspective — like when someone commits an act of gender-based violence — it is difficult, from the institutional perspective, to trace and identify the complex workings of actions,

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., p. 96.

omissions, behaviors, attitudes, and practices that contribute to the creation and recreation of patriarchal states of affairs. In what way, for example, can we say that a particular cis-gendered heterosexual man, a member of a privileged social group, in going about his daily activities, contributes to patriarchy? The problem of patriarchy and the subordination of women, unlike problems of economic distribution, is not obviously quantifiable. The causal mechanisms at work are probably not something we could ever fully trace. As such, Young is convinced that when it comes to responsibility for structural injustice, we must turn our attention to the future to avoid being fixated on how an oppressive state of affairs came into existence.

7.3.1.2. Institutional Backward-Looking Responsibility for Oppression

Although Young does not discuss the relevance of the backward-looking, institutional perspective (and might even seem to say that it is unnecessary when it comes to the question of responsibility), a more comprehensive account of responsibility would engage with it. By asking the question of who the participants in the reproduction and production of oppressive states of affairs were, we are engaging the backward-looking institutional realm of moral assessments.

As argued by Young, everyone could be implicated in a purely causation-based account of responsibility. Everyone who participates in social institutions and practices has some form of incremental causal contribution in creating a state of affairs where oppression persists. For example, political theorists and activists argue that people who buy clothing produced in exploitative sweatshops are causally contributing to the oppression of the factory workers.⁴²⁰ In our consumer practices, it is possible to argue that we are all causally implicated in an unjust global production line through our purchase of goods produced under morally objectionable conditions. But

⁴²⁰ McKeown, M. (2017). Sweatshop Labour as Global Structural Exploitation. In: M. Deveaux and V. Panitch, ed., *Exploitation: From Practice to Theory*. London: Rowman and Littlefield, pp.35-58.

because oppression has an inevitable moral feature, mere causal contribution is not sufficient for the kind of responsibility that matters.

So how can we hold consumers of sweatshop products morally responsible if mere causal contribution is insufficient? We can hold them morally responsible by pointing out that they know – or *should* know – that some consumer goods are produced under morally objectionable conditions and that their consumption of sweatshop goods contributes to and perpetuates corporate practices of exploitative labor. Even if they do not, in a strict sense, intend to contribute to the exploitation of sweatshop workers, they have and should have understood that their consumption of products produced in sweatshops implicates them in the injustice that sweatshop laborers suffer.

Though Young ignores the backward-looking, institutional perspective and criticizes it for encouraging blame game, there is value in trying to understand how an oppressive state of affairs came to be. Through inquiring into the past, we can gain an understanding of how we ended up in an unjust predicament. The backward-looking institutional perspective could function as a sensitizing or awareness-raising mechanism because it requires inquiring into how an oppressive state of affairs came into existence. The backward-looking institutional perspective can lead us to question our participation in practices and norms that contribute to oppression. Even if, as we have acknowledged, it is impossible to identify the exact causal mechanisms that create or constitute oppression, the backward-looking perspective can and should enable us to have some awareness of which practices contribute to oppression.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that when it comes to the backward-looking account of assigning responsibility for *structural* oppression, the type of responsibility we are assigning to many ordinary individuals is usually not severe. Unlike individuals who commit specific acts

of oppression with culpability, we are talking about ordinary individuals' incremental contribution to unjust states of affairs. As such, the weight of this form of responsibility for oppression is, comparatively, light. A cleaner, who works in a large bank which played a significant role in the financial crisis, is not causally implicated in the crisis in a meaningful way, though one could say s/he is involved in and participates in the industry. What this could mean is that we can settle with the idea that mere participation is equivalent to some form of causal involvement, and the moral responsibility being ascribed to such participants still turns on their level of knowledge, control condition or the accessibility of better courses of action, and the impact they have on the unjust state of affairs. This allows for strong moral condemnation of people with significant institutional powers and some degree of moral incrimination to ordinary individuals.

Applying this logic to Sandy's case, the claim is not that Ordinary Person A is responsible for Sandy's homelessness. The claim is, rather, that Ordinary Person A is implicated in Sandy's homelessness if s/he is not engaged in any form of activity that addresses the problem of homelessness in her or his society. The point is that the persistence of structural oppression is largely due to individuals' compliance and participation in unjust practices, norms, rules, institutions, and states of affairs. So long as individuals can reliably foresee that their inaction will result in the perpetuation of oppression, then they can be held culpable for failing to engage in some form of reparation.

7.3.2. Interactional Domain of Responsibility for Oppression

As noted earlier, there is another domain of responsibility for oppression beyond the institutional domain. Looking at the interactional domain, we can identify agents of oppression or agents who have or exercise the capacity for arbitrary interference. Young's *Social Connection Model* deals only with the institutional domain, but individual interactions can also create opportunities to fulfill responsibilities to the oppressed. We must not forget that

responsibilities generated by injustice ultimately stem from the fact that such injustices are suffered by people.

Our political and institutional commitments ought to affect our personal behavior. As Cohen argues, “justice requires an ethos governing daily choice which goes beyond one of obedience to just rules.”⁴²¹ To make more concrete the problem with Young’s account of responsibility (for problems that require a collective solution), there is something amiss with a person who religiously attends all protests for the environment but fails to, at the minimum, engage in recycling practices in her or his own home.

7.3.2.1 Interactional Backward-Looking Responsibility for Oppression

The interactional, backward-looking responsibility for oppression asks who the agents are who committed acts of oppression or group-based acts of arbitrary interference. In the scenario Young envisaged, Sandy did not suffer any interactional harms. Sandy’s apartment was bought by developers, and Sandy was initially happy to relocate. But if Sandy faces a real threat of homelessness, how could it be possible that everyone with whom she interacted with was genuinely tracking her and her children’s interests? If Sandy’s interests were taken genuinely into account, she would not be facing homelessness.

Let us examine Sandy’s situation beyond the constraints of Young’s scenario. Let us assume in this modified scenario that Sandy was lawfully evicted from the property by her landlord. As someone who lives in a society where citizens do not have institutional recourse to housing services, Sandy is susceptible to arbitrary interference because she belongs to a social group of people who do not own but rent property. Sandy’s landlord belongs to a social group who owns property, and landlords have (to some extent) the ability to

⁴²¹ Cohen, G. (2009). *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 136.

arbitrarily interfere with renters. We can say that the landlord is the person who committed a group-based act of arbitrary interference, but this does not automatically render her or him an oppressor.

Recall that the title “oppressor” is reserved for those who culpably and voluntarily exercise their capacity for arbitrary interference. As such, we need to delve into the reasons for the landlord’s action in order to determine whether he is liable to the charge of oppressor. The specific reasons for Sandy’s eviction are relevant in determining whether the landlord is an oppressor. If the landlord is wealthy and is selling his property and evicting Sandy for monetary gain, it does not matter that the landlord has the right to do what he pleases with his property. Such “right” has no more moral meaning than the “right” of slave owners to do what they please with their slaves. Even though they live in a society where property rights are protected, and the landlord’s behavior is legal, normal, and rational, the landlord would deserve the title of oppressor because a side-effect of him pursuing his self-interest is the homelessness of a single-parent family. Sandy’s family’s need for shelter creates an obligation on the part of the landlord to not evict them in the same way that a drowning child in a shallow pond creates an obligation for a bystander to rescue the child.⁴²² In situations of significant disparity in power or when fundamental interests are at stake, individuals acquire duties of care towards the person in need.

On the other hand, if the landlord sells his property and evicts Sandy because he needs money for life-saving medical treatment, then we cannot say that the landlord is really *choosing* to exercise his social group-based capacity for arbitrary interference. If the only way in which the landlord can afford life-saving medical treatment is through selling Sandy’s property, we cannot call him an oppressor. There is a sense that the landlord does not have a genuine choice given his ailing and financial predicament.

⁴²² Singer, P. (1972). Famine, Affluence, and Morality. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1(3), pp.229-243.

There are other important questions about Sandy's predicament. We need to ask how and why Sandy ended up being the sole breadwinner for her children. If the other parent of Sandy's children is able but unwilling to offer financial support, s/he is implicated in Sandy's oppression. We also need to ask why Sandy, despite being in fulltime employment, is unable to afford rental prices. If the company that Sandy works for can afford to pay her a better wage, then the people in that company are implicated in Sandy's oppression. Sandy must have friends and relatives in the city where she lives. If they know that she is facing homelessness and have the resources to put her up, they are implicated in Sandy's story. If Sandy does not have friends or relatives nearby, she must at least have co-workers. When we start to examine how a person ended up in a dire predicament, we are bound to discover that there are people with whom she interacted with who did not take her interests sufficiently into account.

At this point, it is useful to reiterate that oppression is a continuum. Even though we grant the precedence of moral duties not to harm over moral duties to benefit, this distinction may not always hold. In the case of the landlord above, it is Sandy's homelessness that is the issue, but it is still, effectively, the landlord's decision to evict her which is the significant harm producing factor.

But there can also be cases where failures to act can cause significant harm. For example, US politicians, UN representatives, and other individuals with institutional powers who are self-proclaimed protectors of universal human rights received criticism for their failure to intervene during the mass slaughter of the Tutsis and Hutus in Rwanda.⁴²³ The point is that if harm is the moving scale that determines the extent of the oppression, what matters first

⁴²³ Power, S. (2001). Bystanders to Genocide: Why the United States Let the Rwandan Tragedy Happen. *The Atlantic*, [online] (Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2001/09/bystanders-to-genocide/304571/> [Accessed 12 Apr. 2019].

and foremost is the harm suffered rather than whether the harm is a result of someone's action or inaction. This is how the backward-looking conception applies to the interactional aspect of oppression.

7.3.2.2. Interactional Forward-Looking Responsibility for Oppression

Let us now turn to the interactional forward-looking conception of responsibility. A good place to start is the modified case of Sandy and the wealthy landlord, an example of an oppressor. In this scenario, I called the wealthy landlord an oppressor because the main reason for his eviction of Sandy is to maximize profit, which s/he does not, strictly speaking, need.

What ought the landlord to have done in order to avoid being an oppressor? Avoidance of oppression is not supererogatory even given the norms and standards rental practices. Given the nature of competition in the property market and on the invocation of the property rights of the landlord, it could be argued that the landlord's actions are justified and could therefore not count as a moral wrong. If we were to use the language of rights, one could say that there is a clash of rights: Sandy's positive right to housing and the wealthy landlord's negative right to his property. If we, like many liberals insist, grant the precedence of negative rights over positive rights, how can we plausibly say that the landlord is an oppressor?

When we talk about the responsibility to rectify situations of oppression, we are talking about lessening the injustice in a situation. Whenever we improve or alleviate situations of injustice, we are on the path of moral and social progress. It is, at this point, helpful to remember that because of the structural conditions that permit such acts of arbitrary interference, "we are saying precisely that at least some of the background conditions of action are not morally acceptable."⁴²⁴

⁴²⁴ Young, I. (2011). *Responsibility for Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 107.

One thing that this theory of oppression allows us to do is to critique and challenge the status quo. The status quo includes the laws, practices, and norms of a given system. This agent-based construal of oppression allows us to point to a moral wrong by foregrounding the moral aspect of what has been previously considered normal or socially acceptable. The first step is to recognize the mundane and normalized feature of some forms of oppression, in this case, the eviction of a tenant. Once we have identified a harmful norm,⁴²⁵ the next step is to emphasize the harm. It is, so to speak, a way of stretching the accordion on the various ways in which we describe an action or event. The *accordion effect* is a feature of language which allows us to describe an action or event in numerous ways.⁴²⁶ Gavrilo Princip pulled the trigger and assassinated the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in 1914. Political theorists and historians typically describe the event as the beginning of the First World War. The same form of reasoning is invoked when we redescribe the landlord's exercise of his property right as rendering a poor family homeless. Just as historians redescribe an action highlighting the political significance of Princip's pulling of a trigger, we are highlighting the moral aspect of an event and action in our account of oppression. Once we have foregrounded the moral implications of a norm, we are in a better position to point out its wrongness. As such, we can say that the wealthy landlord is an oppressor because he rendered Sandy and her kids homeless for financial profit.

Let us look into a paradigm case of a formerly normalized practice, which is now almost universally accepted to be wrong: slavery. Most people currently view the existence of the institution of slavery as a collective wrong. The idea that human beings could be disqualified from the status of human beings by virtue of their skin color is now considered wrong.⁴²⁷ The institution of slavery allowed for the normalization of practices and conduct that many would now deem to be unthinkable. Back then, it was legal, normal, and

⁴²⁵ Jamieson, D. (2002). Is There Progress In Morality? *Utilitas*, 14(3), pp.318-338.

⁴²⁶ Searle, J. (2010). *Making the Social World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 2.

⁴²⁷ Of course, slavery was not always and exclusively grounded in relation to skin color.

rational to not let people of color sit at the same dining table as white people. But norms cannot function as a moral justification. The most that norms can do is excuse some people on the grounds of ignorance. Excusing a person for an action retains the moral judgment that what she did is wrong whilst abstaining from ascribing blame to the person in question.⁴²⁸

Comparing the wealthy landlord case to situations of slavery, we can say that it is wrong to render someone homeless for monetary gains despite the fact that such an eviction would be considered legal, rational, and normal when judged by society's standards. But what about Sandy's standards? We must imagine what it must be like for Sandy to have to accept that the landlord's interest in maximizing profit outweighs her and her children's need for shelter. From the perspective of Sandy, the wealthy landlord is clearly an oppressor.

Someone who is concerned about oppression is also concerned about moral progress. In order to have moral progress, according to Cheshire Calhoun, we need to engage people in dialogue to bring more and more people in the know about a harmful and wrongful norm or practice.⁴²⁹ When more people are made aware of the situation, there will no longer be recourse to the ignorance argument. We call the wealthy landlord an oppressor because s/he is indifferent to the welfare of her or his tenants. By calling her or him an oppressor, we are telling landlords that they should know and care about their tenants' welfare. In calling her or him an oppressor, we are telling the landlord that s/he should not have prioritized her/his monetary gain and that s/he is insensitive to the pervasive problem of homelessness. There are many things that the wealthy landlord could do in order to not be called an oppressor. S/he could postpone Sandy's eviction until she finds alternative housing. S/he could help Sandy get a better paying job. S/he could have lowered her rent. There is a sense in which we are holding her or him to a higher moral standard precisely

⁴²⁸ Calhoun, C. (1989). Responsibility and Reproach. *Ethics*, 99(2), pp.389-406.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

because we are aiming for moral progress and because the norms governing the interaction between renters and landlords are unjust.

If these interactional or behavioral prescriptions for the landlord appear supererogatory, it is because we are desensitized to the injustice of the system of private property, in the same way that individuals in slave societies were desensitized to the injustice of slavery. The capitalist system that protects private property is responsible for the fact that “the world’s top 26 billionaires now own as much as the poorest 3.8 billion.”⁴³⁰ As Susan James argues in *The Duty to Relieve Suffering*, “a more humane society will need a new morality.”⁴³¹ The point is that more people acting and thinking in a way that is morally superior to the *status quo* is, from an interactional perspective, already contributing to the rectification of situations of oppression.

7.4. Oppression and the Role of the State

So far, we have focused on the role of individuals in situations of oppression. This is because Young’s theory of oppression and responsibility hones in on this issue, whilst it is mostly silent on the role of the state. Pettit’s republican theory, on the other hand, is both a theory of freedom and of the role of the state. He argues that the sole purpose of the republican state is to maximize freedom as non-domination. Pettit makes domination a political wrong through his conception of what the state is and ought to be. There are various other theories about the role of the state in political associations. Depending on which political framework one subscribes to, the function of the state is construed differently.

The libertarian Robert Nozick argues that the only role of the state is to act as a night watchman. The state should limit and minimize its interferences

⁴³⁰ Quackenbush, C. (2019). The World's Top 26 Billionaires Now Own as Much as the Poorest 3.8 Billion, Says Oxfam. *Time*. [online] Available at: https://time.com/5508393/global-wealth-inequality-widens-oxfam/?fbclid=IwAR0dJmIUm-2Ldb2aOYmkBvIVEmvW_QW1BsbzHXQRhFHoaJ5nuxQCx2ZwDFI [Accessed 18 Jul. 2019].

⁴³¹ James, S. (1982). The Duty to Relieve Suffering. *Ethics*, 93(1), pp.4-21.

in the lives of its citizens; its function must be simply to protect citizens “against force, theft, fraud, [ensure that there is] enforcement of contracts, and so on.”⁴³² As such, this libertarian conception of the state does not prioritize eliminating domination with the directness of the republican framework and is also unlikely to be well-suited for the task of alleviating conditions of oppression and injustice, which requires a more active role of the state. As Emily McTernan, Martin O’Neill, Christian Schemmel, and Fabian Schuppert argue, “[t]he answer of how to create a just society is to have a big state: a state that ensures that none are dominated, marginalized or oppressed.”⁴³³

But libertarians are not the only ones who have a view on what the state is or should be. There are a variety of liberal perspectives for what the state’s function is. If we take the view of the liberal Isaiah Berlin – who believes that liberalism allows for pluralist values – then the function of the state is to minimize interferences and to remain neutral between different values and conceptions of the good. In circumstances of oppression and injustice, there are two sets of antagonistic interests, and the situation calls, not for state value neutrality, but for state sensitivity to the injustice. State neutrality, more often than not, turns into support of the *status quo* because there is often a presumption that inaction means neutrality. As Cecile Laborde puts it, “status quo neutrality is a theoretical position which unreflectively takes some background institution or distributive pattern for granted and, as a result, fails to provide an impartial baseline from which current claims about unjust treatment, misrecognition, domination, oppression, and the like can be normatively assessed.”⁴³⁴

Take, for example, the plight of the suffragettes. They were women in late 19th and early 20th century England who were demanding that the

⁴³² Nozick, R. (2001). *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. ix.

⁴³³ McTernan, E., O’Neill, M., Schemmel, C. and Schuppert, F. (2016). If you care about social equality, you want a big state: Home, work, care and social egalitarianism. *Juncture*, 23(2), pp.138-144.

⁴³⁴ Laborde, C. (2008). *Critical Republicanism: The Hijab Controversy and Political Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 13.

suffrage be extended to women. They were claiming that suffrage was exclusionary and unjust to women. It is unclear here what good a value-neutral state would do for the plight of the suffragettes. At the same time, on a republican conception of the state, the suffragettes could claim that, in not permitting women to participate as equals in political life, the state is arbitrarily interfering with the interests of women. As such, under a republican conception of the state, the exclusion of women is automatically a problem for the state. They can immediately articulate demands for political equality because the explicit function of the state is to maximize freedom as non-domination. Insofar as having the freedom to vote and participate in politics is valued as a type of freedom, there is a corresponding call for such freedoms be extended to women. The failure to extend suffrage to women counts as an arbitrary interference, and they are clearly oppressed in the society that they are in.

As such, oppression and domination are, first and foremost, a problem for the republican state. If, as Pettit argues, the role of the state is to maximize freedom as non-domination, the oppression of people means – from a republican perspective – that the state is failing to live up to the reason for its very existence. Holding ordinary individuals responsible for oppression is consistent with the republican conception of what republican citizens are. As Pettit argues, “the legitimate state is required under republican theory to be controlled by its citizens.”⁴³⁵ So there is a sense in which the problem of domination and oppression always devolves to citizens and ordinary individuals because ultimately they are the ones who are supposed to control and see to it that the state is maximizing freedom as non-domination. If a portion of the population is dominated and oppressed, it is the state’s and its citizenry’s job or responsibility to remove the existence of dominating and oppressive relations in society. This view fares well with Young, who notes that

⁴³⁵ Pettit, P. (2012). *On the People’s Terms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 165.

“the state’s power to promote justice depends to a significant extent on the active support of its citizens in that endeavor.”⁴³⁶

The fact that this new concept of oppression fits nicely into Pettit’s republican framework is another reason why there will always be responsible and culpable agents. The state is an agent, and the existence of oppression within a territory under the purview of a state means that the state is failing to attend to its responsibilities. As such, the state could also be blamed or held culpable when it fails to act in response to a justified claim of oppression. The state is an appropriate target for blame when it meets conditions for agency, and state officials are also apt targets for blame when they fail to fulfill their role of maximizing freedom as non-domination.

7.5. Summary of Responsibility for Oppression

In this chapter, I reviewed different perspectives on the responsibility for oppression, where the primary focus was moral responsibility. Three distinctions were introduced: the first being interactional versus institutional responsibility, the second being backward- versus forward-looking responsibility, and the third being responsibility for acts versus omissions. I examined Young’s *Social Connection Model* and identified problems with it. Young’s claim that there can be knowledge of oppression without culpability is incompatible with her own view that oppression is an injustice. It was argued that her claim that people are responsible for correcting conditions of oppression means that she ought also to hold people culpable when they fail to fulfill their responsibilities. Additionally, it was argued that the practice of holding a person responsible may be inseparable from that person being a target of reactive attitudes.

I then turned to our account of responsibility for oppression, discussing the two domains: institutional and interactional. For the forward-looking

⁴³⁶ Young, I. (2013). *Responsibility for Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 169.

institutional conception of responsibility for oppression, I discussed Young as a key advocate of this perspective. Young posits that oppression requires ordinary individuals to join together in collective action and demand structural changes. It was agreed that this is probably the best way to overcome oppressive circumstances, but Young's claim that this is the only way was rejected.

Applying the backward-looking perspective, we saw that almost everyone might be implicated as causally contributing to the creation and perpetuation of an oppressive state of affairs – but it was noted that such a contribution is insufficient for moral responsibility. It was suggested that there was a need to consider an agent's awareness, plus his or her access to alternative courses of action, to be able to infer backward-looking moral responsibility for oppression. It was also pointed out that, contra Young, the backward-looking institutional perspective is valuable in being able to act as an awareness-raising mechanism, since it requires us to inquire into which norms and practices contribute to or cause oppression.

For the interactional account, I emphasized that being an agent of oppression is necessary but insufficient for claiming that someone is an oppressor. The question of whether an agent of oppression is also an oppressor depends on the details of the agent's action or, in some cases, omission. Invoking the precedence of negative rights (duties not to harm) over positive rights (duties to benefit), it was noted that committing acts of oppression tend to be worse than failing to help those who are oppressed, though not conclusively. It was argued that harm is still the most important deciding factor in the determination of oppression. I then turned to the forward-looking interactional conception. It was concluded that many cases of oppression require actions that may appear supererogatory, since we may be desensitized to unjust norms governing the interaction between groups or agents. If more individual action was morally superior to the status quo, that would already contribute to the reduction of oppression.

I then looked at the responsibility of the state, which transcends individual responsibility, and discussed what type of state – liberal, libertarian, or republican – would be most likely to assume responsibility for overcoming oppression. It was concluded that Pettit’s republican account of the state (and the republican framework more generally) is the best available theory of the state to accommodate this new concept of oppression.

So far, we have only discussed responsibility for oppression, but the responsibilities generated by oppression do not lead, unproblematically, to overcoming oppression. Whilst there is a genuine duty to stop arbitrarily interfering with or to track the interests of others, it is unlikely that this is a realistic path towards overcoming oppression. It is overly ambitious to expect people to act against self-interest. A member of the privileged group, for example, who benefits from an oppressive state of affairs is unlikely to voluntarily give up her/his privilege and freedom. In the familiar words of Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.”

CHAPTER 8

Thoughts on Overcoming Oppression

8. Thoughts on Overcoming Oppression

In the previous chapter, we identified some useful distinctions for understanding responsibility for oppression. We saw how the responsibility for overcoming oppression falls on everyone. We also saw that the oppressors and the privileged have the primary duty to overcome oppression. This duty is not controversial and is grounded in general moral principles including the duty of rectification by those causing the harm. Chapter 7 ended with the idea that, although there is a general duty to not arbitrarily interfere with others, it is unlikely that such duties will be fulfilled.

Audre Lorde famously said that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.⁴³⁷ Inasmuch as I want to join others in emphasizing that the responsibility to overcome oppression falls primarily on the privileged, this is not what I want to theorize about. Instead, I will explore the issue from an alternative perspective, especially considering the fact that there is already so much literature on the duties and responsibilities of the privileged. We have little reason to expect that those who are privileged in oppressive situations will take sufficient action to overcome oppression. If some do, we can expect that the majority will not. There are few cases in history where the privileged and the oppressors voluntarily relinquish their privileges without any pressure from the oppressed. This explains the intuition that the wealthy landlord acts within his rights in his eviction of Sandy. We cannot expect that the privileged will willingly give up their privileges. For the privileged, there is a sense in which equality will feel like oppression. How, then, do we overcome oppression? In this final chapter, I shall use "the privileged" to refer to both the privileged and the oppressors.⁴³⁸

⁴³⁷ Lorde, A. (2018). *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*. S.I.: Penguin.

⁴³⁸ Recall that all oppressors are privileged, but not all that are privileged are oppressors.

8.1. The Duty to Overcome Oppression

The dominant narrative is that the privileged have a duty to overcome oppression, but this way of advancing justice only achieves sporadic progress, such as in certain cases of legal oppression, and in some cases none at all. Moreover, it is a narrative told from the perspective of the privileged. It thus becomes necessary to develop an alternative perspective that does not rely on the goodwill of the privileged and does not rely on paternalistic emancipation. This alternative narrative will be told from the perspective of the oppressed.

This narrative calls on the oppressed to overcome their oppression and is consistent with, among others, the prescriptions of Marxism, the accounts of how African-Americans gained their political rights,⁴³⁹ and the work of contemporary philosopher Daniel Silvermint, who explores the obligation of the victims of oppression to resist.⁴⁴⁰

8.1.1. The Prevailing Narrative: Duty of the Privileged

As noted, the view that the privileged and the oppressors have a duty to overcome oppression is not controversial. In *Is There Progress in Morality?*, Dale Jamieson lists four stages to moral progress in relation to a subordinated group. On one interpretation, Jamieson's account is an account of the duty of the privileged and the oppressors to relinquish their privilege in order to achieve moral progress.

In his descriptive account, Jamieson aims not to distinguish between different forms of good or right and bad or wrong but rather to characterize

⁴³⁹ Williams, D. (2014). *I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁴⁰ Silvermint, D. (2013). Resistance and Well-being. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 21(4), pp.405-425.

moral progress and evaluate whether there is moral progress in the real world, as he says “on the ground.”⁴⁴¹ Jamieson characterizes moral progress as “occur[ing] when a subsequent state of affairs is better than a preceding one, or when right acts become increasingly prevalent.”⁴⁴² He identifies “the abolition of war and slavery, the reduction of poverty and class privilege, the extension of liberty, the empowerment of marginalized groups, and respect for animals and nature”⁴⁴³ as plausible candidates of evidence of moral progress. Much, if not all, of what Jamieson identifies as moral progress could also be reformulated in the language of oppression.

It is worth noting that Jamieson’s account explicitly considers how moral progress can be achieved with respect to subordinated collectives. While Jamieson does not explicitly define what it means to be subordinated, his account is consistent with our conception of a group whose interests are liable to arbitrary interference. He notes that “moral progress with respect to a subordinated group has four stages.”⁴⁴⁴ First, there must be a recognition of injustice and the practice of subordination. He is quick to add that the recognition of an injustice has to be clearly “presenting a moral issue, as opposed to a question of taste, etiquette, or personal preference.”⁴⁴⁵ Second, there is a paternalistic defense of the subordinated. Jamieson notes that, in this second stage, “we come to see [the subordinated] as objects of morally admirable charity.”⁴⁴⁶ Third is the move from the view that the oppressed require charity to the view that they have rights not to be harmed. Finally, Jamieson argues that people are entitled to what they need in order to realize their ends. The fourth stage requires a shift in perspective in the sense that “we may come to see [the oppressed] as bearers of ‘positive rights.’”⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴¹ Jamieson, D. (2002). Is There Progress in Morality?. *Utilitas*, 14(03), pp.318.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 321.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

This narrative involving a paternalistic defense of the oppressed can find support if we look at the cases of slaves and women in Western societies. There were the non-Black abolitionists — members of the privileged group — who went to the courts on behalf of slaves and argued for the abolition of slavery. Slaves could not do that because they did not have the status of legal citizens, and even freemen were excluded from most public institutions.⁴⁴⁸ Members of the privileged group like Granville Sharp took it upon themselves to defend and liberate the oppressed.⁴⁴⁹ The Quakers and other members of the privileged group are recognized leaders of the abolitionist movement.⁴⁵⁰ Analogously, John Stuart Mill is famous for being a prominent early feminist, attending Parliament and arguing for women’s right to suffrage at a time when women were legally excluded from formal political participation.⁴⁵¹ In the United States, the adoption of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution which prohibits the denial of the right to vote on the basis of sex is often attributed to the steps taken by the “suffragents,” the men who supported women’s suffrage and who were actually able to vote on it.⁴⁵²

On Jamieson’s account of the paternalistic defense of the subordinated, the privileged undertake certain steps to emancipate the oppressed and thereby achieve moral progress or justice. His is not an explicitly normative account, and he does not directly state that the privileged have a duty to emancipate the oppressed. Yet, the paternalistic defense of the

⁴⁴⁸ Slaves were considered property of their owners. The legal status of slaves beyond that was ambiguous, with various slave codes in the individual states developed to define the relations between slave and slave owner. Even the Supreme Court ruled in the Dred Scott case ruled that no person of African descent, enslaved or free, could be an American citizen. This was only reversed with the Fourteenth Amendment, and the right to vote only came with the Fifteenth Amendment.

⁴⁴⁹ Fisher, R. (1943). Granville Sharp and Lord Mansfield. *The Journal of Negro History*, 28(4), p. 381-389.

⁴⁵⁰ *The Abolitionists: The Abolition of Slavery Project*. [online] Available at: <http://abolition.e2bn.org/people.html> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

⁴⁵¹ UK Parliament. (2019). *John Stuart Mill and the 1866 Petition*. [online] Available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/parliamentary-collections/1866-suffrage-petition/john-stuart-mill/> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

⁴⁵² Goodier, S. and Pastorello, K. (2017). *Women Will Vote: Winning Suffrage in New York State*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

oppressed is a stage of moral progress, and if there is a duty to achieve moral progress, then according to this account, it would, at least in the first instance, fall on the privileged. In that sense, Jamieson outlines, particularly with his second stage, a duty of the privileged to overcome oppression through paternalistic emancipation.

8.1.2. Limitations in Overcoming Oppression

Emancipatory efforts have brought about positive changes that Jamieson would likely call moral progress. If we look at contemporary self-identifying liberal Western societies, slavery has been abolished, and women are now men's political equal. The formal legal oppression of racial minorities is now over. Formal equality of the type that JS Mill, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Martin Luther King, Jr. argued for has been achieved. Mill's quest to have women granted the same political liberties as men has been successfully implemented throughout all Western societies. Mary Wollstonecraft's plea that women be allowed to pursue formal education has been granted.⁴⁵³ Martin Luther King, Jr.'s demand that formal or legally-mandated racial segregation be abolished has been fulfilled. Blatant legal oppression is a thing of the past in most contemporary Western societies. Yet, despite these important achievements, there are also significant limitations to the emancipatory projects of these subordinated groups.

8.1.2.1. Problems with Paternalistic Emancipation

In relation to the achievements discussed above, a survey of statistics would support the claim that, despite formal or legal equality, informal oppression continues for these supposedly emancipated social groups.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵³ Wollstonecraft, M. (2015). *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral subjects*. Lexington, KY: Forgotten Books.

⁴⁵⁴ For data on Young Women's Leadership, Economic empowerment and skills development, and Violence Against Women, see United Nations Women. (n.d.). *Facts and figures*. [online] Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/youth/facts-and-figures> [Accessed 12 Aug. 2019]. For data on the status of African Americans, see Hawks,

Against a libertarian construal of liberty, I do not see the inequality that persists in post-civil rights Western societies as the result of free choice and fair-play. In the absence of coercive legislation that guarantees social group inequality, culture and other non-legal social forces have given birth to a new form of oppression, one that is more insidious and difficult to pin down.

One central reason why the removal of overtly unjust and oppressive laws did not deliver emancipation is that the process of emancipation has been hijacked by the privileged. The story of moral progress Jamieson tells is told from the perspective of the privileged, and human beings can be expected to protect their own interests. The privileged cannot advocate forms of radical change that will benefit the oppressed because doing so would be detrimental to them and their interests. Although, in a superficial sense, it is in the slave master's and wealthy landlord's interests not to be called oppressors, what is even more against their interests is the loss of their right to own other human beings or their right to do as they please with their property. To paraphrase something that Winston Churchill once famously said, history will be kind to him because he intends to write it. That is what has indeed happened in the case of the oppressors of women and racial minorities in Western societies.

If moral progress is “the removal or reduction of injustice without the same or similar injustice being shifted elsewhere so that the benefits of the abandoned injustice are continued by other questionable means,”⁴⁵⁵ then the removal of unjust and blatantly subordinating laws where *de facto* subordination persists cannot count as, all things considered, meaningful

A., Solomon, D. and Weller, C. (2018). *Systematic Inequality: How America's Structural Racism Helped Create the Black-White Wealth Gap*. [online] Center for American Progress. Available at: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/reports/2018/02/21/447051/systematic-inequality/> [Accessed 12 Aug. 2019]. For data on racism in the United Kingdom, see Booth, R. and Mohdin, A. (2018). Revealed: the stark evidence of everyday racial bias in Britain. *The Guardian*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/dec/02/revealed-the-stark-evidence-of-everyday-racial-bias-in-britain> [Accessed 12 Aug. 2019].

⁴⁵⁵ Ci, J. (2010). Negative Duties? Moral Universalism? In: A. Jaggar, ed., *Thomas Pogge and His Critics*. Cambridge: Polity, p. 97.

moral progress. If the repeal of laws against, for example, miscegenation is followed by people avoiding miscegenation based on preferences shaped by racism, that is not moral progress, as Nathaniel Adam Tobias Coleman argues in *The Duty To Miscegenate*.⁴⁵⁶

Whilst it is important to acknowledge that *some* progress has been achieved – for instance, granting women the right to vote – until we deal with the non-legal forces of oppression in a more systematic way, the project of emancipation is unfinished. Moral progress will be stunted. So, in order to make headway in the project of improving conditions of oppression, the oppressed have a responsibility to emancipate themselves because it is unrealistic to rely on the mere goodwill of the privileged. The subordinated need to play an active role in their liberation and quest for equality.

To be in a social position where one is susceptible to or suffers from arbitrary interferences is a state of powerlessness. Part of being oppressed involves having your capacities undermined and being unable to self-determine. Consequently, part of the project of an oppressed group's emancipation is the collective exercise of the capacity to self-determine the terms of emancipation and, where appropriate, to articulate demands of restitution as a collective.

8.1.2.2. Failure to Achieve Justice

When we judge a situation as unjust, it necessarily follows that there are agents required to correct it. If the agents required to correct it are unwilling, they deserve an assessment of culpability. But the responsibility to alleviate or improve unjust conditions does not disappear when we charge those who are responsible but unwilling with culpability. Instead, responsibility shifts to others.

⁴⁵⁶ Coleman, N. (2013). *The Duty to Miscegenate*. PhD. The University of Michigan.

Take the case of an abandoned child. If the child's parents are simply unwilling to fulfill their responsibility to the child, they are deserving of blame because they are failing to comply with their duty to their child. But we do not stop at blaming the parents. We think, for instance, that other relatives of the child need to take responsibility for the child. If there are no such relatives, we look to the rest of society, like the state or social services.

8.2. An Alternative Narrative and the Duty of the Oppressed

Let us return to Jamieson's account of four stages to overcoming the practice and existence of subordination to achieve moral progress. It describes paternalistic defense of the subordinated as a stage of moral progress, thereby speaking to the role of the privileged and the oppressors. It does not directly speak to the role of the oppressed. In that sense, this is an account told from the point of view of the privileged, even if Jamieson does not explicitly say so. It can be surmised from his consistent use of the pronoun "we" that he is speaking as a member of the privileged group and for a privileged audience. He also consistently uses the pronoun "them" to refer to subordinated groups.

In light of the shortcomings of paternalistic emancipation discussed above, I need to replace this account with a theoretical perspective from the point of view of the oppressed. I need to develop an alternative perspective on this from the point of view of the oppressed that does not rely on the goodwill of the privileged and does not rely on paternalistic emancipation.

Do the oppressed have a duty to overcome oppression? There are two possibilities. One view is that the duty to overcome oppression falls on the oppressors, and if they do nothing, then no one else has any duty. We will call this the *No Duty* view. Alternatively, the oppressed might be deemed partly responsible for their oppression — the oppressed have to overcome oppression themselves. We will call this the *Duty of the Oppressed* view.

On the *No Duty* view, any action taken by the oppressed to overcome oppression are supererogatory. As the group liable to harm, they have no duty to fight oppression. On such view, any actions taken by the oppressed are good but not morally required. The alternative narrative is that the oppressed have a duty to overcome oppression. This duty is owed by the oppressed to themselves and to each other. The *Duty of the Oppressed* is grounded both by the general argument that there is a duty to promote justice, which falls on everyone, and there is no decisive reason to think that the oppressed are automatically exempt from it, as well as by the duty to oneself (the self-regarding duty).

Proponents of the *No Duty* view may argue that while the oppressed might have a right to self-emancipate, there is no duty to do so. Here, an analogy with self-defense could be drawn. While there are different views on how far the right to self-defense extends, there is general consensus that individuals have the right to take action to protect themselves against a threat of harm.⁴⁵⁷ Self-defense is enshrined in the laws and constitutions in many legal systems. Yet, outside religion,⁴⁵⁸ there is very little discussion of the duty to self-defense. Likewise, one may argue that while the oppressed have the right to self-emancipation, there is no such duty.

Where will this leave us? In Chapter 7, Responsibility for Oppression, it was noted that everyone is responsible for overcoming oppression. The oppressed may not be responsible on an interactional level for the oppression of themselves and others: they are not usually the ones arbitrarily interfering with their or others' interests.⁴⁵⁹ When the oppressed act in ways that are

⁴⁵⁷ An exception to the general consensus includes some absolute pacifists, who argue against the personal right to self-defense, even in the case of the threat of death, where it would be better to be killed than to kill. This view is rejected by other pacifists as an unattainable ideal, including Gandhi in Gandhi and Andrews, C. (1932). *Mahatma Gandhi: His Own Story*. London: G. Allen & Unwin.

⁴⁵⁸ Charl Van Wyk argues that there is a Biblical duty to self-defense in Van Wyk, C. (2006). *Shooting Back: The Right and Duty of Self-Defence*. Torrance, Calif.: WND.

⁴⁵⁹ Even if they are, they are not doing so *qua* member of an oppressive group.

detrimental to their interests, it is usually because there are penalties for their non-compliance to unjust norms. However, like everyone else, the oppressed – as members of political associations and participants in social institutions – share in the responsibility for the repair or abolition of unjust institutions. This alone causes me to reject the *No Duty* view.

And to reiterate a point above, the privileged and the oppressors are unlikely to voluntarily give up their privileges. Even if they did so and fully exercised their duty to overcome oppression, there are serious concerns with paternalistic emancipation. Therefore, from the perspective of the oppressed, to hold the view that there is no duty to self-emancipate is to believe that there is no injustice.

From the perspective of justice, if there is oppression, someone or some agents have a duty to overcome it. If the duty is not fulfilled, the injustice persists, and there are others who can do something about it, then to hold the view that such others have no duty to rectify the injustice is incoherent. If there is nothing that anyone can do, then it is not an injustice and therefore not a case of oppression. Going back to the case of the abandoned child, when the parents abandon it, the duty to care for the child does not disappear. Moreover, with oppression, the difference to cases of individual self-defense is that there are other people involved – there is a collective.

As such, the responsibility to overcome oppression ends up falling – at least in part – on the shoulders of the oppressed. In order to overcome oppression, the oppressed have to self-emancipate. I cannot rest merely with the judgment that the oppressors and the privileged who do not take sufficient action to overcome oppression are culpable. Additionally, by allowing the duty to emancipate to fall on the oppressed, there is recognition of the agency of the oppressed. Emancipation efforts could be conducive to the development of the agency of the oppressed. One of the ways in which moral progress can be achieved is through overcoming or improving conditions of oppression and

oppressive states of affairs. In fact, overcoming oppression and oppressive states of affairs is or constitutes a form of moral progress.

8.2.1. An Objection: Blaming the Victim

In assigning responsibility to the oppressed for their own emancipation, do I burden them even further? How can I, for example, expect other victims of sexual violence to bear this additional burden of responsibility? When the oppressed develop a collective consciousness that they are oppressed, they face a choice: they must either accept that things are the way they are or try to change how things are. If their common suffering is sufficiently grave, they will be compelled towards collective action to change how things are. Additionally, there are times when we can make a distinction between victims and survivors. It becomes more plausible to assign responsibility to the oppressed if a distinction can be drawn between those who can and cannot take responsibility. We can say that victims of sexual violence do not have a responsibility to emancipate, whereas survivors do.

Something like the Marxist idea of class consciousness can be invoked to ground a distinction: it is the survivors or those that have undergone a political awakening or class consciousness that bear responsibility for emancipation. It is the responsibility of survivors to exhort others to join in, to engage with victims, and to provide guidance on how to become survivors. It is precisely in these types of dialogues that, for example, ameliorative concepts can come to life, like sexual harassment or post-natal depression (as Miranda Fricker demonstrates in her work on epistemic injustice).⁴⁶⁰

The oppressed cannot simply stand side by side with the privileged because the social institutions that we operate within are designed by and for the privileged in a way that reinforces their privilege. In any case, the

⁴⁶⁰ Fricker, M. (2011). *Epistemic injustice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 149.

demandingness of morality is defensible.⁴⁶¹ If the conditions are grave enough, morality can be that demanding, even to the oppressed. To deny them any responsibility for oppression is to rob them of agency or the opportunity to develop their agency. The responsibility to emancipate themselves is what the oppressed owe each other, future generations, and, most importantly, themselves.

When we ascribe responsibility for emancipation to the oppressed, we are ascribing responsibility to a disorganized collective. As discussed in Chapter 7, how that responsibility distributes or devolves to the individual agents that make up the collective turns on specific individual considerations. It will turn on the individual's knowledge, capacity, and relationship to the harm and injustice. Individuals can be excused from this responsibility when the cost is too high. At other times, when others default on their responsibility to emancipate, the responsibility does not disappear, and the ones who are most able must take up slack.

8.2.2. The Duty of Self-Emancipation

This *Duty of the Oppressed* account is not novel and has been expounded on even beyond the Marxist literature. Daniel Silvermint engages with the question of whether the oppressed have a duty to overcome their oppression. In *Resistance and Wellbeing*, he argues that “victims capable of responsible agency have a moral obligation to resist their own oppression.”⁴⁶² Failure on the part of the oppressed to protect or promote one's own well-being is viewed as a “blameworthy failing,” whereby the oppressed become “partially responsible for their diminished level of well-being.”⁴⁶³

⁴⁶¹ Berkey, B. (2016). The Demandingness of Morality: Toward a Reflective Equilibrium. *Philosophical Studies*, 173(11), pp. 3015-3035.

⁴⁶² Silvermint, D. (2013). Resistance and Well-being. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 21(4), pp. 405.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 424.

Silvermint looks at oppression from the perspective of the oppressed, who he refers to as victims. He explores their duty to counter their oppression, which he refers to as “resisting,” and what may ground such a duty. His notion of resistance contemplates not only actual overcoming of the circumstances of oppression, which he refers to as “external resistance,” but also withstanding oppression, which he refers to as “internal resistance.”

Silvermint does not speak about overcoming oppression *per se* but focuses on resistance. He proposes a novel justification for the duty of the oppressed to engage in resistance. He argues that resistance “is a component of objective well-being [of the victim] in oppressive circumstances,”⁴⁶⁴ specifically in that resistance promotes “self-respect and autonomy” of the oppressed. Moreover, on Silvermint’s account, beyond any instrumental benefits, resistance is in itself valuable to one’s wellbeing and morally worthwhile life; however, there is often a trade-off between the intrinsic benefits of resistance and the instrumental harms it may lead to.

While my account posits a collective duty of the oppressed to overcome oppression, Silvermint assumes an individualistic stance on assessing whether there is a duty to resist. On his account, a victim of oppression is relieved from the duty to resist when, based on personal introspection, there would be too much resistance at the cost of other pursuits, when the victim has reasonable individual estimates of excessive costs of resistance, and/or when the victim suffers from a poor psychological state.

So it is in my account. By stipulating the duty of the oppressed to overcome their own oppression through self-emancipation, my account relies on a demanding conception of morality. However, it is the only way to achieve substantial moral and social progress. Contrary to Silvermint’s conclusion that “failing to resist does not reliably contribute to continued oppression”⁴⁶⁵ and

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 417.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 410.

that “the harm that non-resisting victims cause other victims... [is] often or almost always excused,”⁴⁶⁶ I have highlighted the opposite – that self-emancipation is necessary and that relying on paternalistic emancipation is unlikely to fully alleviate oppression. If I accept the *No Duty* view, we will be stuck in oppressive circumstances.

As Silvermint points out, there seems to be a “trade-off between taking the agency of victims seriously and taking the circumstances of oppression seriously.”⁴⁶⁷ Given these options, the lesser evil is to take the agency of the oppressed seriously: it is the only realistic path towards moral, political, and social progress. Everyone, including the oppressed, has a duty to promote justice. Failure to do so is a failure of moral agency. Moreover, as argued above, complete emancipation and freedom from oppression is achievable only through self-emancipation.

8.3. From Collective to Individual Duty: Prisoner’s Dilemma

So far, I have addressed the duty to overcome oppression and presented the account of the duty of the oppressed to self-emancipate. The discussion has been about the collective duty of the oppressed. How does this collective duty translate into individual duty on the part of oppressed people?

In simple cases, the collective duty is distributed among individuals based on individual circumstances (as outlined in Chapter 6). But most cases of oppression are far from simple. As Marilyn Frye argues, “[o]ne of the most characteristic and ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by oppressed people is the double bind – situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation.”⁴⁶⁸ Many cases of oppression are construed as situations of damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don’t, and any comprehensive study of the

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 413.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 406.

⁴⁶⁸ Frye, M. (1983). *The Politics of Reality*. New York: Crossing Press, p. 2.

concept of oppression must take seriously this difficulty.⁴⁶⁹ This exacerbates one of the challenges of self-emancipation, namely problems of consensus. As discussed, not all issues easily achieve consensus, especially when the group in question is large and when individuals are faced with exclusively poor options. Let us examine in more detail the entrenchment and obstinacy of injustice.

8.3.1. Actual Versus Transcendental Interests

As touched upon in Chapter Five, Section 5.3.1.1., there are two ways in which people can conceive of objective interests: *actual* and *transcendental*. Interests are actual when they refer to real and existing interests. But sometimes people can also conceive of interests in a *transcendental* way, that is, in anticipation of a future that is not guaranteed.

Political activists and oppression theorists who invoke a *transcendental* conception of interests often make proclamations about how the emancipation of an oppressed group serves to emancipate us all. In *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female*, Frances Beale argues that it is “essential for those who understand the workings of capitalism and imperialism to realize that the exploitation of black people and women works to *everyone’s disadvantage* [my italics] and that the liberation of these two groups is a stepping-stone to the liberation of all oppressed people in this country and around the world.”⁴⁷⁰ Beale is saying that knowledge of how capitalism and imperialism’s mechanisms work can serve as a guide for liberation. But whilst it is true that such knowledge can be useful for overcoming oppression, the path to liberation is so much more complex and torturous than this passage seems to suggest.

⁴⁷⁰ Beale, F. (2008). *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female*. *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, 8(2), pp.171.

Beale seems to jump from an *actual* and *transcendental* conception of interests without sufficient awareness that this is what she is doing. When she says that “the exploitation of black people and women works to everyone’s disadvantage,” she seems to be invoking a *transcendental* conception of interests, where exploitation and imperialism do not exist, because, in the current and actual world, exploitation exists and it works *for the advantage* of the exploiters and imperialists. In the actual and current world, the interests of the powerful and the oppressed are in conflict with each other, and there is no easy way to dissolve the contradiction between the different sets of antagonistic interests.

Marx should not have ended the *Communist Manifesto* with “[you] have nothing to lose but [your] chains... Working men of all countries, unite!”⁴⁷¹ because in the actual world, workers have jobs to lose and families to feed. When workers summon other workers to participate in strike action, they often formulate the demand to join the strike as being in the interests of the workers they are trying to convince when, in fact, it is not in the actual existing interest of workers to participate in the strike. If the strike is successful and the demands of the strikers are satisfactorily met, it becomes true that it was in all the workers’ interest to participate in the strike. But if the strike fails to achieve its objectives, then, *ex post*, it was not in the interests of the workers to strike because they forewent their wages. To reiterate Young’s point, for as long as capitalist competition is the norm governing our economic activities, not being exploited is worse than being exploited because being exploited at least means that you have a livelihood.

When moral pioneers oppose sweatshops, they have to be careful about the potential loss of livelihood of sweatshop workers. A more troubling problem about sweatshops is that the victims of sweatshop exploitation may

⁴⁷¹ Marx, K (1978). *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. In: R. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. New York: Norton & Company, Inc., p. 474.

actually accrue benefits from working in sweatshops. As Matt Zwolinski argues, “Exploitation can... be mutually beneficial, where both parties walk away better off than they were *ex ante*. What makes such mutually beneficial interactions nevertheless exploitative is that they are, in some way, unfair.”⁴⁷² Statements about a transcendental future where the injustice of, for example, exploitation no longer exists can function to obscure the convoluted and difficult work that is required in order to ameliorate or overcome oppression.

8.3.2. Distinction Between Perverse and Abnormal Moral Contexts

Though Marxists typically display the optimism about overcoming oppression – because Marxist philosophy has a formula for how to bring about the end of the capitalism – feminists also sometimes fail to take seriously the moral and political damage that fighting oppression involves. It is easy to underestimate the moral costs of overcoming oppression, and this is something some Marxists and feminists have been guilty of. Perhaps in their desire to overcome oppression and in their efforts to exhort others to join their causes, activists have a tendency to downplay the sacrifices required to escape oppressive states of affairs.

In *Responsibility and Reproach*, Cheshire Calhoun problematizes the process by which we can improve conditions of oppression with the notions of moral ignorance and abnormal moral contexts. She considers “how... we [can] locate individual responsibility when oppression occurs at the level of social practice.”⁴⁷³ According to Calhoun, there are two kinds of moral contexts: normal and abnormal. In normal moral contexts, “the rightness or wrongness of different courses of action is “transparent” to individuals, where “transparent” does not mean self-evident, but simply that participants in normal moral contexts share a common moral language, agree for the most

⁴⁷² Zwolinski, M. and Wertheimer, A. (2017). "Exploitation", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), [online] Available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/exploitation/> [Accessed 15 Mar. 2019].

⁴⁷³ Calhoun, C. (1989). Responsibility and Reproach. *Ethics*, 99(2), pp.391.

part on moral rules, and use similar methods of moral reasoning.”⁴⁷⁴ In contrast, “abnormal moral contexts arise at the frontiers of moral knowledge when a subgroup of society (for instance, bioethicists or business ethicists) makes advances in moral knowledge faster than they can be disseminated to and assimilated by the general public and subgroups at specific moral risk (e.g., physicians and corporate executives.)”⁴⁷⁵ Drawing on the resources of standpoint theory, we can add that certain individuals – due to their epistemically privileged social location – can come to see through the legitimating forces of their plight.

Calhoun is worried that ignorance can be exculpatory, because it poses a challenge for the project of assigning responsibility. Calhoun then argues that even if ignorance is exculpatory, we can still reproach people because that is the way we normalize an abnormal moral context and improve conditions of oppression. She talks about an ordinary man who “always refers to women as ‘girls’ or ‘ladies’” and how he “ought not be blamed for linguistically infantilizing or patronizing women.”⁴⁷⁶ Calhoun is convinced that what the person is doing is wrong, but that given social norms the person is not culpable for the wrong. The way to normalize abnormal moral contexts is through reproaching individuals for their non-culpable moral wrongs because such reproach will rob them of an exculpatory reason. Moral ignorance can make one open to reproach. The problem with Calhoun’s analysis is that she has chosen a social practice that is not particularly or overtly harmful, so it seems as if normalization of the abnormal moral context is a straightforward and unproblematic process.

However, if we repeat a similar analysis for FGM, we shall see that responsibility for unjust social practices can be extremely problematic.⁴⁷⁷ The

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 394.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 396.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 398.

⁴⁷⁷ Though I do not occupy the appropriate standpoint to theorize about FGM, I come from a culture that practices male child circumcision. There are plenty of similarities between FGM

medical knowledge that FGM is harmful did not make the practice disappear and despite the United Nations' and the WHO's campaigns to end the practice, it continues in over thirty countries. The percentage of women who undergo the procedure is still staggeringly high: 98% in Somalia, 97% in Guinea, 93% in Djibouti, 91% in Egypt, and 90% in Sierra Leone.⁴⁷⁸

As Calhoun notes, knowledge about an injustice can create an abnormal moral context. Calhoun, however, understands abnormal moral contexts to be scenarios wherein there is still a clear right or wrong action, but the rightness or wrongness of the action is not transparent to most people. This can work for cases where the harm in the oppressive social practice is not particularly significant, as with sexist language. There seems to be no grave social cost imposed when all that needs to be done is to call out bad language. The cost on the moral pioneer in this situation is not very serious. The worst thing for this feminist is that she might be deemed a killjoy and viewed as a confrontational person.⁴⁷⁹ But for more harmful social practices that are deeply entrenched in some cultures, it is unclear that there is an unequivocal correct course of action available. So, in addition to abnormal and normal moral contexts, we can also have situations of *perverse moral contexts*, where there is no obviously right or wrong course of action.

Imagine you are a mother in Somalia, where 98% of females undergo FGM. You come across a pamphlet by the WHO or UNICEF about how FGM is a human rights violation. Though most people do not change their minds when presented with new evidence,⁴⁸⁰ you become convinced that FGM is

in Africa and the practice in the Philippines, so I believe I do have some similar cultural background that equips me to study this practice.

⁴⁷⁸ UNICEF, Unite for Children. Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: What might the future hold? UNICEF, New York. [online] Available at: https://www.unicef.org/media/files/FGM-C_Report_7_15_Final_LR.pdf [Accessed 15 Mar 2019]

⁴⁷⁹ Even if the feminist who corrects sexist language suffers social isolation in some contexts, the feminist can befriend other feminists who share her views. For a feminist "Killjoy Survival kit," see Conclusion 1 of Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham: Duke University Press.

⁴⁸⁰ Kolbert, E. (2017). Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds: New discoveries about the human mind show the limitations of reason. *The New Yorker*. [online] Available at:

wrong and decide that you will not subject your daughter to the harmful practice. In Somalia, FGM is performed on girls between the age of four and eleven. So, when your twelve-year-old daughter comes home asking you why you did not have FGM performed on her, you are ready to show her the pamphlet that convinced you that FGM is wrong.

Unfortunately, your daughter does not care about the pamphlet. What she cares about is the fact that she is the only girl in her school who has not had FGM. She is ridiculed by her peers for being unclean. She is called names and suffers insults. When other girls share stories of their bravery and resilience after the operation, your daughter is bitterly silent and is angry that her mother has stopped her from participating. She wants to feel normal and be accepted by her peers, but the people in her community regard her as a social deviant. As the WHO is clearly aware, “the social pressure to conform to what others do and have been doing, as well as the need to be accepted socially and the fear of being rejected by the community, are strong motivations to perpetuate the practice. In some communities, FGM is almost universally performed and unquestioned.”⁴⁸¹

In Calhoun’s scenario of sexist language, there is clearly a right course of action (i.e., reproach) despite pervasive moral ignorance. Here, however, it is unclear that this kind of collective moral ignorance can give guidance on what any individual should do.⁴⁸² Both of the two available options that the mother faces involve a wrong. She believes that FGM is a human rights violation, so she does not want it for her child. But she also sees how much her daughter is suffering because her mother is a moral pioneer in their community. So, in perverse moral contexts, the right action may not only be *not* transparent to the general population (as it is in Calhoun’s abnormal moral

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/27/why-facts-dont-change-our-minds> [Accessed 1 May 2019].

⁴⁸¹ Who.int. (2018). *Female genital mutilation*. [online] Available at: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/> [Accessed 1 May 2019].

⁴⁸² Even if we say that the community is culpably ignorant, there is still no right course of action.

contexts), our confidence in our ideas about what is right or wrong can disappear altogether. Given that FGM is widely practiced in their society, whatever the mother does will harm her child. She has to choose between doing something she believes is wrong (FGM) or be responsible for her child's social isolation and the full burden of its consequences.

The only way that the mother in this scenario can escape this dilemma is to move to a country where FGM is not practiced. Unfortunately, this option is unavailable to 73% of the Somalian population (at a minimum) because the majority of Somalians live in abject poverty.⁴⁸³ Significant financial capital is required to leave an impoverished country, so the option of not participating in an unjust social practice is probably not available even to their middle class. It can only be an option for the handful members of Somalia's economic elite. In any case, even if the mother in our scenario saves up enough money to buy plane tickets for her and her daughter to go to, for example, the UK, she would be unable to leave Somalia because, without some form of external sponsorship, it is practically impossible for a poor person from a Third World country to acquire a visa (even a tourist visa) to rich countries. This is why Noa Nogradi, in *Should She Be Granted Asylum?*, argues that gender should be included as a basis for being granted asylum.⁴⁸⁴

8.3.3. Oppression as a Prisoners' Dilemma

Some situations of oppression involve a *perverse moral context* because oppression can sometimes be like a prisoner's dilemma, where Prisoner A's interests are construed as in competition with Prisoner B's

⁴⁸³ Koneru, S. (2016). Ten Things You Need to Know About Poverty in Somalia. *Borgen Magazine*. [online] Available at: <https://www.borgenmagazine.com/10-facts-poverty-in-somalia/> [Accessed 1 May 2019].

⁴⁸⁴ Nogradi, N. (2015). Should she be granted asylum? Examining the justifiability of the persecution criterion and nexus clause in asylum law. *Etikk i praksis - Nordic Journal of Applied Ethics*.

interests.⁴⁸⁵ In a prisoner's dilemma, not knowing about how Prisoner B will behave, Prisoner A forms the belief that the best course of action for her is to rat out Prisoner B. If Prisoner B rats her out, at least she did the same thing, so they both suffer the penalties of their non-cooperation with each other. If Prisoner B does not rat her out, she walks free albeit with the moral taint that she has betrayed her friend.

In both cases, Prisoner A is thinking about what is best for her as *an individual* since she does not know how Prisoner B will act. Without certainty and assurance of loyalty and cooperation between the prisoners, they are in a damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don't situation: from either prisoner's perspective, the two options are bad. If she rats him out, her friend will be imprisoned, and she will have played a role in his incarceration. If she does not rat him out, she could be imprisoned by her friend. Both choices have bad consequences from an individualistic perspective. The Prisoner's Dilemma, like some situations of oppression, activates individualistic and antagonistic reasoning among the oppressed.

But if Prisoner A trusts Prisoner B, she will have access to a possible scenario that is non-existent in the scenario above. If there is trust and loyalty among the prisoners, collective intentionality is activated. Collective intentionality is the ability of individuals to form "collective intentions in planning and acting."⁴⁸⁶ If Prisoner A believes that Prisoner B is loyal and trustworthy, she can form the belief that "Prisoner B is trustworthy and loyal, he will not rat me out." Such a belief can cause her to form a collective intentional state of the form "We will get out of here." The collective intentional

⁴⁸⁵ Kuhn, S. (2019). "Prisoner's Dilemma", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) [online] Available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/prisoner-dilemma/> [Accessed 15 March 2019]

⁴⁸⁶ Searle, J. (2010). *Making the Social World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 43. It is also worth noting that there are two main types of intentional states: beliefs and desires. These mental states have, according to John Searle, "conditions of satisfaction." Beliefs have a *mind-to-world* direction of fit. A belief is true (or false) depending on whether the content of the belief fits (or does not fit) the reality in the world. Desires have a *world-to-mind* direction of fit because desires do not represent the world as they are, they are mental states that express how we would like the world to be.

state that is formed in her mind produces an individualistic prescription on how she ought to behave in order for her collective desire – that they both get out – to be fulfilled. By modifying her individualistic intentional state to a collective intentional state, she forms the belief that she ought to stay silent if her desire has a chance of getting satisfied.

The same is true for some cases of oppression. If there is consensus among the oppressed to stop participating in their oppression, we can escape oppressive situations. Unfortunately, when injustice occurs at the level of social practice, it is sometimes difficult to even see that there is a wrong to begin with. If and when a wrong is identified, it can be very costly to be a moral pioneer. In fact, the status of being a moral pioneer (as discussed in relation to the proleptic use of the language of oppression), is largely contingent upon how things turn out. The suffragettes, militant activists that demanded women's right to vote in England, were criminals. They were seen as threats to the social order, and rightly so. They are moral pioneers of their time, but the recognition of them as moral pioneers came almost a hundred years later. Today, we are still trying to reconcile the now prevalent idea that the franchise is a basic right of every person with the idea that women were prohibited from voting. In this sense, the individual duty of the oppressed to overcome oppression and self-emancipate is dependent on the context. It is grounded in actual interests and faces the challenges of the prisoner's dilemma arising out of *perverse* moral contexts.

8.4. Overcoming Oppression through Self-Emancipation

The content of the duty of the oppressed is to engage in a process of self-emancipation. Here, I will modify Jamieson's four-step process by drawing on a Marxist account of overcoming oppression. The oppressed need to develop a group consciousness, akin to the Marxist notion of class consciousness, and then take the necessary action to overthrow or at least improve the conditions of existing injustice.

8.4.1. The Process of Overcoming Oppression by Self-Emancipation

The first step to overcoming oppression is diagnosis. Here, Jamieson's analysis seems right: there must be a recognition of injustice and the practice of subordination. One way to achieve this is to identify a moral or political issue that affects a group of people. An issue is an isolated area of reality upon which the interests of those involved can be appraised.

As discussed in Chapter 6, there needs to be consensus among a group that they are victims of an injustice. They need to identify a particular issue that they collectively deem to be unjust. Issues can be as minor as dress code – for instance, when women in the Philippines protested and won a legal battle against companies that required women to wear high heels to work.⁴⁸⁷ Issues can be as major and as comprehensive as a demand for a change in government. In Syria, the majority Sunni population felt oppressed by the rule of the minority Alawites. What started off as street protests turned into an armed rebellion that engulfed the whole country in a now ongoing war.⁴⁸⁸ The Communist Party of the Philippines is a Maoist organization that seeks to overthrow the existing capitalist mode of production through armed rebellion because they deem the existing system as oppressive and unjust.⁴⁸⁹

The smaller the scope of the issue, the better the chances of attaining consensus and resolution. Political issues that require major social or political change affecting a large population – as in Syria and in the Philippines – are less likely to be resolvable. But the point is that a general theory of oppression

⁴⁸⁷ Yi, B. (2017). High heels at work? Not necessary, says the Philippines. *Reuters*. [online] Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-women/high-heels-at-work-not-necessary-says-the-philippines-idUSKCN1C01H4> [Accessed 1 May 2019].

⁴⁸⁸ Fildis, A. (2012). Roots of Alawite-Sunni Rivalry in Syria. *Middle East Policy*, 19(2), pp.148-156.

⁴⁸⁹ Kistler, C. (2019). The NPA: 50 years of People's War under the leadership of the Communist Party of the Philippines. *Red Spark*. [online] Available at: <https://www.redspark.nu/en/peoples-war/philippines/pcm-long-live-the-50th-anniversary-of-the-new-peoples-army/> [Accessed 1 May 2019].

needs to be able to make sense of the varied and diverse ways in which people perceive oppression.

Returning to Jamieson's four-step solution to oppression, I must reject his second step — paternalistic defense of the oppressed — and instead draw from Marxist theory the ideas of collective self-emancipation. For Marxists, the oppression of the proletariat can only be overcome through the proletariat's collective effort. To quote Engels, "the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself."⁴⁹⁰ Similarly, the oppressed can attain their freedom by forming a collective where they can discuss their issues and figure out what they can and should demand from the rest of society.

Consider, by way of an example, the United Kingdom's domestic worker tied visa. In April 2012, the Conservative government removed the concessions granted to domestic workers that come to the UK with their foreign employers. "Domestic workers operating under the new visa system... can be forced to work long hours, are not paid the minimum wage, denied overtime pay or simply not paid at all."⁴⁹¹ In short, there is no implementation of the rules and regulations designed to protect workers. A plausible reason for this is a legal loophole.⁴⁹² Domestic workers can be classified as family members of their employers, and, of course, it is the employer who decides whether the domestic worker is "treated" as a family member. It is explicitly stated in the Overseas Domestic Workers in Private Households: WRK2.1 Guidelines that, "If the applicant is not a member of the employer's family but

⁴⁹⁰ Draper, H. (2019). The Principle of Self-Emancipation in Marx and Engels. In: R. Miliband and J. Saville, ed., *The Socialist Register*. London: Merlin Press, pp.81-110.

⁴⁹¹ Sloan, A. (2013). The Domestic Workers Forced Into Modern Slavery. *The Guardian*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/nov/26/domestic-workers-modern-slavery-visa-laws-tie-employers> [Accessed 1 May 2019].

⁴⁹² Bascara, R. (2019). Gender Injustice, Global Injustice, and Migrant Domestic Workers in the United Kingdom. In: N. Hadjigeorgiou, ed., *Identity, Belonging and Human Rights: A Multi-Disciplinary Perspective*. [online] Online: Brill. Available at: <https://brill.com/abstract/book/9781848884571/BP000009.xml> [Accessed 1 May 2019].

they live in their home, they will not qualify for [the national minimum wage] for work done for their household if they are treated as a member of the family.”⁴⁹³

Domestic workers formed various self-help organizations, like The Voice of Domestic Workers and the Filipino Domestic Workers Association.⁴⁹⁴ They came together because they believed that the tied visa is unjust. They are working to raise awareness in British society about the harms they are subjected to due to the type of visa that they have. They have achieved consensus amongst themselves and formed a united collective to campaign against the tied visa, and their demand is that the government return the concessions, such as the right to change employers. We should be able to say that they are making a justified claim of oppression given the consideration that there are no other domestic workers in the UK contesting or protesting against their campaign. It is through their shared experiences, deliberation, and solidarity that they are able to garner support from charities and secure extensive media exposure for their plight.

The penultimate step to overcoming oppression through self-emancipation is for the collective to articulate their demands. The methods of articulating those demands are outside the scope of our project, and even amongst Marxists views range from “propaganda and the practical carrying out of their social plans”⁴⁹⁵ to revolutionary action. The possibilities span a wide range from joining humanitarian institutions and activist groups to leading radical revolutions. The final step is, of course, the achievement of the demands of the oppressed. Issues that can be articulated with significant

⁴⁹³ UK Visas and Immigration (2014). *Overseas domestic workers in private households: WRK2.1*. Crown Copyright. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/overseas-domestic-workers-in-private-households-wrk21/overseas-domestic-workers-in-private-households-wrk21--2>

⁴⁹⁴ Karpf, A. (2019). When escaping an abusive employer is a crime: the trap Britain sets for Filipino domestic workers. *The Guardian*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/jan/15/when-escaping-an-abusive-employer-is-a-the-trap-britain-sets-for-filipino-domestic-workers> [Accessed 1 May 2019]. <http://fdwa.co.uk/>

⁴⁹⁵ Marx, K. (1978) *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. In: R. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., p. 498.

precision have a greater chance of resolution, whereas attempts at overarching overhauls of unjust systems are often unattainable without protracted, resolute, and coercive measures. Karl Popper's distinction between *piecemeal* and *utopian* social engineering is useful here.⁴⁹⁶ One could believe that the practice of having domestic workers is unjust and must therefore be abolished, but that would be characterized as a *utopian* project. But if we can hone in on a specific issue, like the domestic worker's tied visa, then we are engaged in *piecemeal* social engineering that has a better chance at success.

In summary, the duty of the oppressed is to engage in a process of self-emancipation by developing a group consciousness, forming a collective, then taking the necessary action to overcome the oppression. But what if nobody has the consciousness or knowledge of the oppression? Is there then no duty to self-emancipate? It is conceptually possible to separate the epistemic from the ontological, but it is practically impossible. If there is an existing situation of injustice, someone is going to observe it or think it, especially if the harm satisfies a threshold requirement.

Those that have the consciousness and knowledge have the duty to overcome oppression. They are tasked, firstly, with educating others who are in their social location. As noted in our discussion of epistemic privilege, it is the oppressed who are more likely to have special insight into their oppression. The greater the proportion of the people in the group who have the knowledge, the less demanding the duty is on each individual. Those that have the requisite knowledge are thus interested to raise the consciousness of everybody else. An example is Calhoun's notion of feminist policing to spread consciousness by correcting sexist language.

⁴⁹⁶ Popper, K. (2011). *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, Chapter 9.

8.4.2. An Objection: Fostering Divisions

I have conceptualized this account of oppression in terms of two groups who have opposing and conflicting interests, claiming too that the oppressed have a duty to self-emancipate. According to Young, “[t]he philosopher is always socially situated, and if the society is divided by oppressions, she either reinforces or struggles against them.”⁴⁹⁷ Someone could object to this account of overcoming oppression by saying that it advocates divisiveness. Instead of encouraging everyone to address a common goal as a united collective, I am emphasizing difference and sectarianism. How could the path to moral progress and emancipation further entrench difference?

To answer this, we should return to Marx. We cannot go from capitalism to communism; an interim stage of socialism is necessary. We now also know (too well) that we cannot go from centuries of gender and racial subordination to gender and racial equality by merely changing the laws. As Carol Hau argues, “pedagogy cannot operate without any hierarchizing since the gap between imagining and actualizing unity among the people cannot be wished away without a program of struggle.”⁴⁹⁸

Emancipation is a protracted process. Foregrounding difference is helpful for identifying the benefits and privileges of the powerful. As Young argues, “[t]he impulse to community often coincides with a desire to preserve identity and in practice excludes others who threaten that sense of identity.”⁴⁹⁹ Prior to the coining of the term marital rape, it is arguable that husbands had the *de facto* “freedom” to rape their wives, and the notion of marital rape is designed to curtail that “freedom.” Emphasizing structural disadvantage

⁴⁹⁷ Young, I. (2011). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 5.

⁴⁹⁸ Hau, C. (2000). On Representing Others: Intellectuals, Pedagogy, and the Uses of Error. In: P. Moya and M. Hames-Garcia, ed., *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p.139.

⁴⁹⁹ Young, I. (2011). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 12.

involves demonstrating that there are competing interests between hierarchical social groups. When the social categories of race and gender were constructed, there was ontological injustice: women were defined as inferior to men, at least in most Western constructions of gender.⁵⁰⁰ When, according to Mills, the racial contract was created, Blacks and other non-whites were defined as inferior to Whites.⁵⁰¹ We cannot simply wish away the fact that the interests of the privileged and the interests of the oppressed are in conflict. For the privileged, equality will feel like oppression. Like the dictatorship of the proletariat, this standoff is unavoidably antagonistic. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir, “[a]ll oppression creates a state of war.”⁵⁰²

When the counter-narrative is strong enough to compel the protectors of the status quo to take notice, the people in power and the dissenters face a choice: they can either negotiate through peaceful means or resort to coercion. The question of whether violence is justified will turn on the specific considerations of the situation in question and is beyond the scope of this dissertation.⁵⁰³

As in Marxism, this account of emancipation hopes for a brighter future. The antagonistic counter-narrative that will be used for emancipation is, hopefully, not permanent. Although foregrounding the antagonism is necessary, it is only temporary. The need for foregrounding difference is merely an instrument for attaining or at least getting as close as possible to realizing equality. Advocates of positive discrimination do not wish for such a policy to operate indefinitely. It is not intended as a guide that captures the

⁵⁰⁰ Jenkins, K. (2016). Amelioration and Inclusion: Gender Identity and the Concept of Woman. *Ethics*, 126(2), pp.394-421.

⁵⁰¹ Mills, C. (1997). *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

⁵⁰² Beauvoir, S., Borde, C. and Malovany-Chevallier, S. (2011). *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage, p.770.

⁵⁰³ Frantz Fanon argues for the necessity of violence in the decolonization process in Fanon, F., Farrington, C. and Sartre, J. (1967). *The Wretched of the Earth. Preface by Jean-Paul Sartre. Translated by Constance Farrington*. Penguin Books: Harmondsworth.

right universal moral code for how we ought to live together.⁵⁰⁴ There are corrective measures that are required in order to be able to move forward, but the goal we are working towards is still to transcend the situation that requires foregrounding the antagonism. The goal is to address the contradictions and, where possible, dissolve them.

8.5. Summary of Thoughts on Overcoming Oppression

In this chapter, I examined the issue of overcoming oppression, beginning with a discussion of the duty to overcome oppression. We considered two competing narratives – one emphasizing the duty of the privileged and paternalistic emancipation, the other arguing for a duty of the oppressed. I outlined the problems with paternalistic emancipation. It was conjectured that part of the reason why women and racial minorities continue to be oppressed in Western societies is because the process of emancipation has been commandeered by the privileged. I argued that the oppressed have, as a collective, a duty to overcome oppression through self-emancipation. I considered an objection to this view: in holding the oppressed responsible for emancipation and overcoming oppression, I might be additionally burdening the victim. It was argued that the ascription of responsibility to the oppressed can be an opportunity to develop their agency.

We moved to a discussion of how the duty of the collective translates into individual duty and problems with consensus. The distinction between *actual* and *transcendental* interests was analyzed, and the insensitivity of some theorists to the distinction was noted. We then considered Cheshire Calhoun's distinction between a *normal* and an *abnormal* moral context, and a further category of perverse moral contexts was added. In an *abnormal* moral context the right action still exists; in a *perverse* moral context our ideas about what is the right or wrong action disappears altogether. With this distinction in place,

⁵⁰⁴ Bascara, R. (2016). Compatriot Partiality and Cosmopolitan Justice: Can We Justify Compatriot Partiality Within the Cosmopolitan Framework?. *Etikk i praksis - Nordic Journal of Applied Ethics*, 10(2), pp. 27-39.

a framework for analyzing oppression was articulated in relation to the idea of a prisoner's dilemma. It was shown how oppression can activate antagonistic individualistic thinking among the oppressed and shown too that it is only through developing forms of collective consciousness or collective intentionality that situations of oppression can be escaped.

We then considered self-emancipation and the case of migrant domestic workers in the UK who formed organizations to articulate their shared demands. We considered another concern with our account of overcoming oppression – that of fostering divisions. Someone might claim that this account of oppression encourages sectarianism and focuses on difference instead of cooperation. It was argued that foregrounding the antagonisms between the oppressed and the relevant privileged group is only a temporary measure designed to aid the process of emancipation. Foregrounding difference is instrumental for the advancement of the interests of the oppressed.

Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation has been to construct a univocal theory of oppression, and this was done through an amendment of Philip Pettit's recently defended and widely disseminated theory of domination. Against Iris Marion Young's claim that the concept of oppression has no essence, I embarked on a project of conceptual engineering and strategically constructed an essence of the concept of oppression.

One major motivator for this project is my belief that conceptual clarification is one of the primary tasks of philosophers.⁵⁰⁵ The concept of oppression is the target because I see it to be one of the most widely applicable and relevant political concepts. If we can say clearly what oppression is, we can offer conceptual backing to contemporary emancipatory movements. By getting clear on conceptual issues, we can help better frame empirical problematics.

Not so long ago philosophers would dismiss topics that involved concepts that were not amenable to precise explication or verification.⁵⁰⁶ We have clarified that oppression is necessarily group-based, that *contra* Haslanger, a single agent suffering a unique harm cannot count as oppressed no matter how much harm or injury that agent suffers. We have clarified that oppression involves two social groups: a group that suffers harm and a group that is privileged in relation to the harmed or disadvantaged group. We have also clarified that, as an injustice, oppression always generates responsibilities to overcome or ameliorate oppressive circumstances. Against Cudd, it has been argued that an independent social group identity is not a necessary component for the existence of oppression. We have also clarified that oppression is a contextual phenomenon sensitive to a harm threshold, that not

⁵⁰⁵ See the Introduction of Blackburn, S. (1999). *Think*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁵⁰⁶ See Carnap, R. (1996). The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language. In: S. Sarkar, ed., *Logical Empiricism at its Peak: Schlick, Carnap, and Neurath*. New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc, pp.10 – 31 and Wittgenstein, L., Russell, B. and Ogden, C. (2007). *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. New York, NY: Cosimo Classics.

all instances that could be described or viewed as group-harm count as oppression. The severity and nature of the harm plus the number of agents affected play a role in the determination of oppression.

But if clarity is the main goal, then it must be admitted that the univocal ontological criterion defended here is not crystal. In particular, the reliance on the vague notion of “arbitrary interference” as a central component in the theory defended seems imprecise and, to some extent, dependent on people’s intuitions.⁵⁰⁷ The terminology is inherited from Pettit,⁵⁰⁸ and Pettit clearly understands an arbitrary interference as something that “fails to track the interests,” but it remains obscure what, exactly, counts as a failure to track someone’s interests. As such, the precision that this doctoral project sought remains somewhat elusive.

This lack of clarity cannot be resolved easily. Instead of providing a dictatorial criterion for what oppression is, Chapter Six: **The Epistemology of Oppression**, considered methods for adjudicating claims of oppression. If the notion of arbitrary interference relies on an account of interests, then, due to the diverse conceptions of interests reflecting different moral and political persuasions, there is still substantial ambiguity about what oppression actually is. The account offered here leaves much room for speculation and contestation about what counts (and does not count) as oppression.

Still, we are left with two options. The first is to accept or defend the value of vagueness or fuzziness. As Nassim Taleb points out, “[c]ategorizing is necessary for humans, but it becomes pathological when the category is

⁵⁰⁷ Both Tom O’Shea and Frank Lovett make a similar point, though they are focusing on the notion of arbitrariness in O’Shea, T. (2019). *Are Workers Dominated?*. *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, In press(In press) and Lovett, F. (2012). What counts as arbitrary power?. *Journal of Political Power*, 5(1), pp.137-152.

⁵⁰⁸ Though, arguably, the term “arbitrary” was introduced and popularized by John Rawls through his notion of “morally arbitrary”, found throughout Rawls, J. (2005). *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, Rawls, J. (2005). *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, and Rawls, J. (1993). The Law of Peoples. *Critical Inquiry*, 20(1), pp.36-68.

seen as definitive, preventing people from considering the fuzziness of boundaries.”⁵⁰⁹ Vagueness about “arbitrary interference” offers us a more permissive concept, open to use by people of diverse moral, political, and cultural perspectives. Because what counts as an arbitrary interference is different for different individuals, varying from one context to another, we should preserve the imprecision within this new conception. This way, we also heed Young’s warnings against the exclusionary tendencies inherent in the explicative project of defining oppression.

Felix Oppenheim⁵¹⁰ and Ian Carter⁵¹¹ would probably defend a stronger claim. Both are proponents of value-neutral political concepts. And because the notion of “arbitrary interference” does not presuppose the superiority of one political or moral framework over another, then they might say that I succeeded in developing a value-neutral political concept. Charles Taylor argues that “a *political* framework cannot fail to contain some, even implicit, conception of human needs, wants, and purposes.”⁵¹² Although, like any user of the concept of oppression, I have been importing my personal moral and political convictions into the analysis, the concept remains open to use by others who hold contrary views.

A libertarian, who advocates for a so-called minimalist state that forces that existing distribution of private property,⁵¹³ and a socialist, who requires a state engaged in continuous redistribution and provision of public services, could both accept the univocal account of oppression offered here whilst disagreeing about the role of the state or what is and what is not an oppressive state. Carter and Oppenheim would say that I have defined oppression in a

⁵⁰⁹ Taleb, N. (2010). *The Black Swan*. London: Random House Publishing Group, p. 15.

⁵¹⁰ Oppenheim, F. (1973). “Facts” and “Values” in Politics: Are They Separable?. *Political Theory*, 1(1), pp.54-68.

⁵¹¹ Carter, I. (2015). Value-freeness and Value-neutrality in the Analysis of Political Concepts. In: S. Wall, P. Vallentyne and D. Sobel, ed., *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy, Volume 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁵¹² Taylor, C. (1994). Neutrality in Political Science. In: M. Martin and L. McIntyre, ed., *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, p.p. 568.

⁵¹³ I thank Koshka Duff for reminding me not to concede too much to libertarians.

way that is amenable to people holding different moral and political perspectives. Given this, we are in a better position to focus our discussion on genuine moral and political disagreements. Carter and Oppenheim are (I think) likely to celebrate this value-neutral criterion for oppression as a philosophical achievement. They could interpret the permissibility and fuzziness of the notion of “arbitrary interference” as essential for the attainment of value-neutrality.

The problem with this first option is that it is likely to be unsatisfactory for those who, like me, want to advance a political agenda. For instance, some spouses could argue that the introduction of the notion of marital rape, along with its corresponding legal and cultural sanctions, constitutes an arbitrary interference or does not track their interests. An advocate of property rights could also reject the claim that Sandy is oppressed or that the wealthy landlord is an oppressor. The property rights advocate could argue that any state-sponsored initiative to protect tenants from eviction constitutes an arbitrary interference against – or does not track the interests of – landlords. Given the injustice governing gendered relations and the widespread acceptance of the capitalist ethos, both the spouse and the property rights advocate have grounds for such claims. As previously noted, prior to the recognition of the notion of marital rape, spouses could be said to have, in at least one weak sense, the “freedom” to rape their partners. Landlords can invoke property rights as inalienable, rendering any institutional protective measure governing the process of eviction as an arbitrary interference. As such, the fuzziness or the value-neutrality of the conception defended here could be deemed a weakness for it could license the correct use of the concept for conservative or reactionary political agendas.

There is, however, another option. We can try to further clarify. We can try to get a surer grip on what an arbitrary interference is. We can embark on a project of operationalizing the concept of oppression by focusing our efforts on the determination of what constitutes an arbitrary interference. Let us ask everyone their views on what counts as an arbitrary interference. Let us ask

people of different moral and political persuasions to engage in debate in order to see which conception of interests triumphs or prevails. Even if we concede the point made by Philip Gorski that “the good itself is plural” and that there can be no “one-size-fits-all model of the good life,”⁵¹⁴ it seems plausible that consensus about what is bad or wrong is more attainable. In other words, even if there is deep disagreement about what counts as the good life or which positive conception of liberty is the best (to use Berlin’s terminology), we might still be able to agree on what is bad or what constitutes an arbitrary interference. Achieving clarity here is a more manageable goal than the project of determining which moral and political framework gives us the best answer to the question of what is good for human beings. As Koshka Duff argues, we can try “to understand what is wrong and inhuman and distorted and monstrous in the present state of things... without a fully worked-out image of the Good to guide us.”⁵¹⁵

Mao Zedong was so certain that the Marxist conception of interests was superior to any other that he proclaimed that we must “let a hundred flowers bloom and a thousand schools of thought contend.”⁵¹⁶ As someone who has been embedded in a Third World revolutionary movement, who acknowledges the urgency of widespread, global material deprivation, it is tempting to agree with Zedong and propose that we test these conceptions of interests. Given finite resources, it might be desirable to exclude some conceptions as conducive to generating legitimate claims of oppression. I could disagree with Oppenheim when he said that the effort to “base normative principles of politics on factual assertions about politics”⁵¹⁷ is driven by a commitment to

⁵¹⁴ Gorski, P. (2013). Beyond the Fact/Value Distinction: Ethical Naturalism and the Social Sciences. *Society*, 50(6), pp.550.

⁵¹⁵ Duff, K. (2014). ‘Adorno’s Practical Philosophy’ ‘Adorno’. Review of Adorno’s Practical Philosophy by Fabian Freyenhagen and Adorno by Brian O’Connor. *Marx and Philosophy Review of Books*. Online at https://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviews/7861_adornos-practical-philosophy-adorno-review-by-koshka-duff/

⁵¹⁶ Mao, Z. and Lin, P. (1967). *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*. 2nd ed. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, pp.302-303.

⁵¹⁷ Oppenheim, F. (1973). “Facts” and “Values” in Politics: Are They Separable?. *Political Theory*, 1(1), p. 66.

“certainty at any price”; I could point out that it is really justice at any cost that underlies the motivation to conceive of facts and values as inseparable.

This second route of concretizing what arbitrary interference means or operationalizing the concept of oppression has the potential to make claims about oppression empirically verifiable. In establishing as fact that certain groups are oppressed, we could better address (and overcome) oppression. Scarce resources can be directed more efficiently towards the emancipation of the most oppressed, both in the degree of harms suffered and the number of agents affected. The harm threshold contained in our ontological criterion, may open the way for the development of a metric upon which we can arrange all the different kinds of existing oppressions according to lexical priority. Whilst it could be deemed desirable to have an inclusive concept of oppression that can accommodate diverse moral and political frameworks, scarcity of resources means that not all existing oppressions deserve, require, or command equality in treatment.

Perhaps lookism is a form of oppression,⁵¹⁸ so we can understand why there are people engaged in activism or raising awareness about such status hierarchies. But given that there are more serious, pervasive, and life-threatening forms of oppression, perhaps there is no strong or urgent political imperative to rally everyone to dismantle this particular hierarchy. The harm threshold condition could set a cap on which structures count as oppressive, whilst simultaneously permitting individuals and groups to make a case for why their predicament could qualify as an instance of oppression.

Abstractly, this unified theory of oppression demands that all claims of oppression are accompanied with corresponding ascriptions of responsibility. But our empirical reality unavoidably restricts the validity of normative prescriptions, especially when we are committed to the idea of realizability. As

⁵¹⁸ Warhurst, C., Broek, D., Hall, R. and Nickson, D. (2012). Great expectations: gender, looks and lookism at work. *International Journal of Work Organisation and Emotion*, 5(1), p.72.

noted in the Introduction, Charles Mills' insistence that political philosophy ought not be an end in itself but a means or tool for the advancement of justice is compelling, so I am more inclined towards this second option.

One could argue that in taking this line, we return to the problem of paternalism (as discussed by Berlin). However, if our conception of facts relies on the pragmatist account of truth discussed in Chapter Six, then we can keep any nascent tendency towards coercion in check. The pragmatist account of truth encourages us to say that we should establish, as facts, that certain groups are oppressed because they are amenable to empirical investigation. As such, the account offered here and the prescription to establish, as facts, that certain groups are oppressed are inoculated to Berlin's concerns. So, the next step towards further clarification would be to establish what counts as an arbitrary interference and to consider which available conception of "arbitrary interference" best serves our needs as an interdependent community committed to moral, political, and social progress.

Marx famously said that philosophers have only interpreted the world, but that the point is to change it.⁵¹⁹ In doing so, he offers a normative conception of what philosophy should be. It is an attack against the type of political philosophy of which Carter and Oppenheim are advocates. Similarly, Cohen once said that "in so far as I was a Marxist I was not a philosopher, and in so far as I was a philosopher I was not a Marxist."⁵²⁰ Perhaps he, too, felt that there is a contradiction between the pursuit of philosophical knowledge and the quest for moral and political progress. But acceptance of the idea that some truths and facts are socially constructed may mean that this alleged contradiction is reconcilable, and this work on the concept of oppression should be considered as a step in that direction.

⁵¹⁹ Marx, K. (1978). Theses on Feuerbach. In: R. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. New York: Norton, p.145.

⁵²⁰ Cohen, G. (1995). *Self-ownership, Freedom, and Equality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.2.

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