

# What do we mean by “structural” oppression?

## *Social Structure, Individual Agency, and Approaches to EDI*

*Sam Popowich*

### **Introduction**

I want to talk to you today about what constitutes “structure” when we talk about structural oppression. I’m speaking to you from Treaty Six territory, home and gathering place of many Indigenous peoples including the Cree, Blackfoot, Iroquois, Dene, Nakota Sioux, Saulteaux, Inuit, and M’etis. As we will see, the treaty system embodies the violent theft of land, making it a kind of legal fact, and therefore constitutes the kind of structuralism I want to talk about today. I’m going to be speaking specifically from a Marxist perspective. Other theoretical and activist frameworks, like Critical Race Theory, for example, have their own understanding of what structures are and how they work. I should also note that this talk is a brief sketch of some ideas that form part of a larger project.

References to structural oppression - particularly structural racism and sexism - have abounded in the period of deep social crisis following the Global Financial meltdown of 2008. The appeal to “structure” is meant to undercut the idea that social problems are the result of individuals, individual choices, and individual bias. Structural issues with the police are counterposed to the “few bad apples” argument used to excuse police violence. Structural racism is counterposed to “unconscious bias” which argues that racism is the product of individual error rather than the product of social relationships.

In 2021, Yanli Li at Wilfrid Laurier University published an important article in *College & Research Libraries* entitled “Racial Pay Gap: An Analysis of CARL Libraries”. Li performed a statistical analysis on a sample of the data gathered as part of the 2014 8Rs CARL Libraries Practitioners Survey. After discussing racial pay gaps in Canada and the US, and performing a statistical analysis on CARL data, Li concludes that

there is a significant salary disparity between visible minorities and nonvisible minorities. Racial differences in job characteristics account for a larger portion of the explained racial salary gap than individual and labor market characteristics [and] the effect of race on salary is shown to be weaker for librarians than for support staff. (Li 2021, p. 436)

In the conclusion, Li finds that the racial pay disparity in Canadian librarianship is not adequately explained by individual and labour market characteristics, but that the “unexplained portion of the racial salary difference can

be partially attributed to discrimination” (Li 2021, p. 451). Li does not use the expressions structural discrimination or structural racism, but given the prevalence of questions of structural oppression in Canadian library discourse today, Li’s conclusions raise the possibility of a structural or systemic explanation.

In the summer of 2020, a summer marked particularly by anti-Indigenous violence by municipal police and the RCMP, RCMP Commissioner Brenda Lucki denied the presence of “systemic violence” within the organization. In the wake of George Floyd’s murder, and the deaths at the hands of the police of numerous Indigenous people in Canada last summer, Lucki was asked about structural racism within the RCMP and replied that while there was likely “unconscious bias” among various individual officers, “if systemic racism is meaning that racism is entrenched in our policies and procedures, I would say that we don’t have systemic racism” (Leblanc and Kirkup 2020). In the face of criticism, Lucki later changed her position, but gave no indication that she truly understood what systematic or structural racism is.

In a Maclean’s editorial on Lucki’s statement and the RCMP’s historical commitment to anti-Indigenous violence, Pam Palmater, Chair of Indigenous Governance at Ryerson University, called for Lucki to be dismissed and the RCMP abolished.

The RCMP has shown that they can not reform their institution. They have come to be known as the ‘Royal Canadian Disgrace’ by their own inaction. The oft-repeated recommendations for sensitivity training, cultural-awareness training, or diverse hiring practices are not effective in rooting out racialized and sexualized violence against Indigenous peoples. The problem is not Indigenous culture, it’s RCMP culture, which finds time and time again that the racial profiling, harassment, brutality and the killing of Indigenous peoples is somehow justified.

If we compare Li’s findings with the Lucki case, it is clear that the issue of structural or systemic racism applies to Canadian librarianship just as much as to the RCMP. At one point in her response, Lucki confessed that “I have to admit, I really struggle with the term ‘systemic racism’ [...] I have heard about five or 10 different definitions on TV” (Leblanc and Kirkup 2020). This underlines David James Hudson consistent called for analytical specificity when using terms such as whiteness, anti-racism in LIS research. In this talk I want to try to get at some of the specifics of what what the “structural” or “systemic” part of “systemic oppression” means, and a good place to start is to delve into the question of what it means to explain social phenomena at all.

## **Explanation and Causation**

What does it mean to explain something? One way - but by no means the only one - is to understand how something relates in a relation of cause to

effect. However, cause and effect is an abstraction that risks doing violence to or erasing the specificity of lived experience.

In his 1980 novel *The Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco writes that "We are already hard put to establish a relationship between such an obvious effect as a charred tree and the lightning bolt that set fire to it, so to trace the sometimes endless chains of causes and effects seems to me as foolish as trying to build a tower that will touch the sky". For Eco, the sheer complexity of the world means that any understanding of cause and effect must be so abstract as to completely misrepresent the complexity of the real world. Similarly, for Nietzsche, in his *Uses and Abuses of History for Life* of 1874, the specificity of historical moments mean that "the real historical nexus of cause and effect... would only prove that nothing quite similar could ever be the case again from the dice-boxes of fate and the future".

Thus, for both Eco and Nietzsche, the abstraction required of understanding causality erases the specificity of experience, reduces it to an abstract level that does violence to real people's lived experiences. And yet, as the abolitionist Frederick Douglass noted, we can't escape the process of cause and effect in which we live and work: "A man is worked upon by what he works on," Douglass wrote, "He may carve out his circumstances, but his circumstances will carve him out as well".

And yet, abstraction appears to be a necessary element in human understanding. Pattern recognition, for example, is a reductive abstraction, as are model building and hypothesis formulation. The closed-system experiments of the natural sciences are abstractions as well. So the question becomes not how can we do away with abstraction in order to do justice to the specificity of lived experience, but how can we balance abstraction with the recognition of difference. Intersectionality, to my mind, is an attempt to achieve this kind of balance, recognizing both the causal effectiveness of social structures and their differential effects.

In fact, contemporary discourse both in librarianship and broader society, is rife with questions of action and consequences. Intellectual Freedom absolutists insist that words and ideas can cause offence but not harm; right-wing opponents of "cancel culture" feel that speech should never have consequences; our culture is full of debates between consequentialist and deontological positions arguing whether or not an intention or an outcome should be the focus of ethical judgements.

In terms of library policy, the question of cause and effect enters into issues around "equity, diversity, and inclusion", the causes of oppression, and the best ways to resolve them. In order to understand what EDI policy proposals may work - may do more than simply reintegrate oppressed people back into the same oppressive milieu we are trying to change - we have to have some sense of how "our circumstances carve us out". And this in turn requires taking a position not only on causality but on social ontology, and we will address both of these in turn.

This paper is a work of analysis. Too often, debates over policy, society, and EDI presume a particular point of view without ever making it explicit. De-

bates over EDI end up being debates between particular theories of causation or social ontology. I want to claim here that understanding what our causal or ontological commitments are and being explicit about them may show us where our differences over EDI may come together and where they are completely incommensurable. In particular I want to focus on the idea of structural causality, which requires a non-individualist social ontology. In this paper I will begin by looking at a few examples of structuralist discourse in contemporary social justice, then I will turn to a genealogy of the idea of structure, and compare it with other forms of causality. Then I will turn to the question of social ontology and the particular political commitments that arise from different ontological perspectives.

## Structural Oppression and its Denial

References to structural oppression - particularly structural racism and sexism - have abounded in the period of deep social crisis following the global financial meltdown of 2008. The appeal to "structure" is meant to undercut the idea that social problems are the result of individuals, individual choices, and individual bias. Structural issues with the police are counterposed to the "few bad apples" argument used to excuse police violence. Structural racism is counterposed to "unconscious bias" training which argues that racism is the product of individual error rather than something transindividual, the product of social relationships.

The denial of structural oppression is vehement. Besides the Brenda Lucki case mentioned earlier, I want to mention the UK government Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report released in April 2021. The report echoed Lucki's complaint about confusion around the term "structural racism", claiming that "linguistic inflation" (i.e. adding "prefixes like institutional, structural, and systemic") adds to the problem because when "they are used interchangeably [it] creates further confusion and reduces the likelihood of perpetrators to be caught and punished". The Commissioners felt that "it is important to shift discussions about systemic or structural racism onto more objective foundations [by] rooting these terms in observable metrics" (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities 2021, p. 36). With respect to schooling, however, despite the "confusion" of terms, "the Commission believes the causes for ethnic disparities... are complex and multifaceted, and can not be reduced to structural racism and individual teacher bias" (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities 2021, p. 78).

The Commission's report came under immediate criticism, especially given the disproportionate effect of the COVID-19 epidemic on racialized people. Writing in *The Conversation*, Vanessa Apea and Yize Wan, both of Queen Mary University, London, noted that

This reductive view [i.e. of the Commission] is far removed from the vast body of robust research, including our own, which identi-

fies racism as key to generating and reinforcing longstanding health inequity. In health terms, inequity specifically refers to systematic differences in outcomes between groups that are unfair or discriminatory. This has never been more true than during a pandemic that is having a disproportionate effect on ethnic minority communities. (Apea and Wan 2021)

Just as the “few bad apples” argument ascribes police violence to individual actions, so too does the denial of structural racism absolve the British Government of the responsibility to try to do anything about it. Within universities and libraries, the denial of structural racism or sexism takes two forms: the ascription of error or misbehaviour to individuals, and the “outsourcing” of responsibility for structures to rules, policies, and procedures (a good example of this was the use of the CDAA process at Laurentian. Laurentian also brought in “objective” consultants to handle the assembly-line layoffs of large numbers of faculty and staff). The end result is the same: decision-makers claim to have no power either to change individual behaviour or to change policy; they are therefore absolved from having to deal with questions of equity, diversity, and inclusion as such. The idea of “structure” challenges the status quo in a way that both individual and juridical approaches do not.

There is, then, a discursive struggle between those who insist on the structural nature of oppression and discrimination and those who deny it. But this struggle is not transparent: adherence to the idea of structure and denial of structure reflect deeper social and philosophical commitments which are often left unsaid or are even unconsciously held. Two of the most important of these commitments that I want to explore here are the questions of causality - how can a structure have particular racial or gender-based effects? - and social ontology - if racism and sexism are not located in individuals, where can they be located? We will explore each of these in turn.

## Theories of Cause and Effect

With the development of science and engineering as supports to capitalist and colonial power over the natural world, the question of causality became more and more important. The quasi-magical causation of Medieval religious thought was replaced by the predictable and reproducible theories of causality necessary for scientific method. As we know from developments in reproducible science today, experiments must be reproducible in order to support a hypothesis, which in turn means that a well-defined effect must always follow from a well-defined cause.

For a long time the theory of causation employed by the natural sciences was that of David Hume, for whom the regular succession of two events was both necessary and sufficient to describe causality. If *every time* I strike a bell with a hammer, the bell produces a note, then striking the bell can be said to cause the production of the sound. However, all I can really say is that

each time I strike the bell a note is sounded, but I can make no prediction that such a cause will always produce such an effect. In a way, this is how a non-structural view of racism and other forms of oppression works: racism is caused by an individual always choosing to perform a particular action, like use a racial slur. This is obviously an oversimplified view of racism that cannot take into account many of the clear effects of racism, redlining for example. In this view, acts of violence by individual police officers against people of colour would be both necessary and sufficient for racism: there would be no need to look further for the causes of racism, and the conviction of individual police officers after a crime was committed would be the proper way to combat racism. This is palpably absurd.

Another theory of causality adopted by the natural sciences is that of Immanuel Kant. Where the Humean notion of causality essentially saw cause and effect as isolated, atomistic events which we were not justified in drawing any conclusions or making any predictions about, Kant's view allows us to say "if striking the bell always produces a tone, then we can say that striking the bell causes the tone to sound, and we can predict that in future this will always be the case". Kant's theory of causal explanation is therefore stronger than Hume's: it allows us to explain and predict. As a result, if we know that acts of violence are caused by individual police officers, then we don't have to wait for an act of violence to occur (as with Hume's causality), but can seek to address it before hand, through sensitivity or unconscious bias training for example. In this view, acts of racist violence are still sufficient but are no longer necessary for racism to exist, but the appropriate way to try to deal with it still at the level of individual action. This is where libraries are today in their attempts to deal with questions of EDI.

In Hume's view, the solution to questions of EDI is just to stop racist or sexist behaviour without addressing the reasons people might behave in a racist or sexist manner. This was, in many ways, the perspective of white, settler society after the Second World War: as long as racist or misogynist or homophobic actions didn't take place, people could be as racist, misogynist, or homophobic as they wanted; polite society - read bourgeois society - was satisfied. Today, we have shifted - though still by no means completely - to Kant's model, where racism and sexism are ideas held by individuals and are distinct (but causally related) racist and sexist actions. The proper way to prevent racist and sexist actions is to change individual minds and ideas. In addition to this being an individualist social ontology (which we will look at below) it is an idealist one, seeing people's ideas as causal in the world rather than the material conditions of people's lives. We will return to this distinction a little later.

Now, it may seem as if I am indulging in an unjustified confusion of natural science and the social or human sciences. Leaving the question of naturalism aside for the moment, I will turn to Fredric Jameson's account of causality in his book on interpretation (i.e. anti-naturalist scholarship). In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson discusses three forms of causality which he finds in the work of Louis Althusser.

In the first place, there is "mechanical causality" - we can think of the inter-

action of billiard balls - in which an effect is caused by some kind of physical or mechanical interaction involving an exchange of energy. When one billiard ball strikes another, kinetic energy is transferred between them causing an effect on the position, velocity, and trajectory of each ball. Likewise, when we transfer thermal energy from a heating element to a pot of water, the temperature of the water rises. When the temperature reaches a certain point (100 degrees centigrade), it causes a change of state in the water from liquid to steam. Older, deterministic social and political theories often see human social life as mechanically causal in this sense, for example in the social philosophy of Thomas Hobbes.

In the second place, there is what Althusser and Jameson call "expressive" causality, in which a total whole - society for example - has a kind of inner essence which is expressed by each of the elements within it. This too tends towards a kind of determinism, as in the dialectic of Hegel, in which every element is conditioned by the inner essence of the whole to act in a particular way. This is not a mechanistic determinism but might be understood as a historical determinism (and indeed, historical determinism is often - but erroneously - ascribed to one of the most important inheritors of Hegelian thought, Marxism).

The third form of causality is "structural" causality, which Althusser took over and applied to politics and society from the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. If, for Hegel, the inner essence of the totality - Spirit, for example - is separate from its historical effects, what is important about "structure" for Saussure and Althusser is that a structure and its effects are one and the same. Althusser writes that

effects are not outside the structure, are not a pre-existing object, element or space in which the structure arrives to imprint its mark: on the contrary, it implies that the structure is immanent in its effects, a cause immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term, that the whole existence of the structure consists of its effects, in short, that the structure, which is merely a specific combination of its peculiar elements, is nothing outside its effects. (Jameson 1981, pp. 24-25)

1

Saussure's original idea of structure was language, in which individual words take on meaning from their relationship within the structure of a given language, and there is no Language that exists outside the usage of words that gives them meaning. There is no "English" that stands outside the use of English words and sentences, but those words and sentences form a structure that has a causal effect on the words and sentences themselves. It is in this sense that language - or a language - is an "absent cause". For Althusser, history itself is such an absent cause, existing in nothing but its historical events, but

---

<sup>1</sup>Althusser argued that the "break" between the young and mature Marx involved the rejection of society as a Hegelian "expressive totality" in favour of a structural view.

having a causal, structural effect on those of us who are producing history. We can recall here the Frederick Douglass quote from earlier in the paper.

In *The Prison House of Language*, Jameson analyzed in detail the fortunes of Saussure's structural model. In the 1960s, structuralism began to seem itself too deterministic. The elements that make up a structure, it was argued by post-structuralists like Jacques Derrida, were never completely determined by the structure, there was always a certain amount of play or slippage in what those elements "mean" within a social whole. Post-structuralists began to see structure as an abstraction that did violence to the rich, unique, unrepeatability of lived experience, i.e. they returned to Nietzsche's insight about the "historical nexus of cause and effect" and Eco's view of cause and effect as too complex to adequately make sense of our world.

The dialectic of abstraction/specificity, identity/difference, structure/agency is complex and contested. Post-colonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has argued for the relevance of "strategic essentialism" as a way of forging bonds of solidarity and collective action, and Stuart Hall has written about the very real political importance of shared representation. For Hall, the truth of the contingency of identity "does not make it any easier to conceive of how a politics can be constructed which works with and through difference, which is able to build those forms of solidarity and identification which make common struggle and resistance possible but without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities, and which can effectively draw the political boundary lines without which political contestation is impossible, without fixing those boundaries for eternity" (Hall 1993, p. 445).

In today's usage, the term "structure" often varies quite widely: from a deterministic social formation which binds everyone in particular modes of behaviour (e.g. patriarchy has malign effects on men just as much as on women), to a social formation used by an oppressor against the oppressed (e.g. structural racism is a tool used by colonial white supremacist society against Black and Indigenous peoples), to simply being a shorthand for transindividual social phenomena, localized social structures or social relationships, which do not carry any strong concept of causality at all. It is important to bear in mind the multiple and often confused ways "structure" is used both by its adherents and its critics. But it is important to bear in mind that there are specific ways understanding "structure" common to many social and human sciences.

## Individualism

One thing that concepts of structure always have in common is the denial of absolute individualism. This denial can vary widely, but it always challenges the dominant social ontology of Western political thought. As developing capitalism eroded the relationality of Western European society in the 15th and 16th centuries, moral and political philosophy sought to justify this erosion by positing society as composed originally of isolated, atomistic individuals, who only enter into social relations after the fact, as a form of contract. The

use of "contract" as the model for all social relations reflects this philosophy's indebtedness to capitalist culture.

But what do we mean by a social ontology? One of the perennial questions of philosophy is to understand and categorize what exists in the world, what takes up space, or has causes effects. An individualist ontology - such as social contract theory, for example - sees the fundamental building blocks of society as individuals alone. Individual decisions, choices, actions, behaviours are all that "count" in the world, and only individuals can cause effects. This idea is the cornerstone of Western politics and social thought and is deeply ingrained in librarianship's notions of intellectual freedom, community relationships, and equity, diversity, and inclusion. The individualist social ontology maps onto the Kantian form of causality we looked at above. We may, for analytical purposes, imagine things other than individuals as having social weight, but fundamentally all activity, all change, is the sphere of the isolated individual alone. It is for this reason that things like "unconscious bias" training is prevalent in EDI: racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination are the product of individual bias, seen as an error to be corrected by the individuals themselves. This is equally true of "wellness" initiatives that seek to make the individual feel better about themselves and their place in the world, without seeking to transform and improve the social world itself <sup>2</sup>.

While individualist social ontology is not the only option, those who hold alternative perspectives are relegated to "critics", to alternatives to the mainstream, correct worldview. Marxists hold to a social ontology that includes socio-economic class, while feminists, Critical Race Theorists, and Indigenous thinkers include various other agents within their social ontologies. What is important here is to recognize that any reference to "structural" or "systemic" oppression fundamentally disagrees with the dominant individualist ontology. This is why it is so hard for anyone in an entrenched power structure to see or admit that structural elements exist; for them, as for Margaret Thatcher, "there is no such thing as society, there are only men and women".

This is not to say that individual's have no agency, or that individual actions don't have consequences. Simply that what we *think* of as individual agency, individual actions, individuality itself, is always social. In her investigation of structure and agency, Margaret Archer makes the important point that while it "is surely correct" to say that 'the causal power of social forms is mediated through social agency', "unless we accept that structural and cultural factors ultimately emerge<sup>3</sup> from people and are efficacious only through people, then social forms are reified. [...] only because people envisage particular courses of action can one speak of their constraint or enablement" (Archer 2003, pp. 2-4), that is of the kind of causality in play with social structures.

For all non-individualist social ontologies, there are mechanisms by which the social world forms and determines individual identities, behaviours, etc.

---

<sup>2</sup>I have written elsewhere about the difference between recognition and redistribution in social justice struggles in Canadian librarianship (Popowich 2021).

<sup>3</sup>Considerations of space preclude me from going into the details of "emergence"; nevertheless it is an essential category for Critical Realist social thought.

Being born into a patriarchal society organized along binary gender lines *produces* women as women (and men as men). Being born into a white supremacist society *produces* racialized people. This is not to say that those *people* and their cultures would not exist without patriarchy and white supremacy, but that patriarchy and white supremacy are social structures which determine how those individuals and cultures develop. Colonialism is perhaps an even clearer expression of this, as we can trace pre-contact and post-contact social developments with some precision.

In many ways, this kind of structuring process is mutual: the colonizer is influenced by the colonized just as much as colonized by colonizer. But this mutual influence must not be allowed to negate the question of power, which overdetermines certain kinds of structuring over others. For example, while Indigenous words in European colonies often crept into the colonizer language, Indigenous languages do not take a position of dominance in the colonizing country the way English, French, Spanish, or Portuguese became the dominant languages in colonial regions.

But in addition to these mutually - if asymmetrically - influential social structures, there are others which exert their influence from one generation to the next, and which are therefore immune from reciprocal influence. Language is perhaps the clearest expression of this, as the language one learns from one's parents is not an individual choice or decision, but a structuring operation that takes place prior to the formation of individuality itself. Furthermore, the language one learns situates an individual within a network of culture and power, dominance and subalternity, colonialism, race, and ethnicity. How one relates to the products of capitalist culture - Hollywood movies, for example - is in many ways predetermined by one's relationship to American English, and through English to whiteness and middle-class values.

The point here is that what takes place in the past - history - has a structuring effect on the present, on the formation of individuality itself. What appears to be contingent in the moment it unfolds - a particular decision, choice, whim, for example - becomes in a sense *necessary* the moment it has happened. Colonialism may have been one out of many different options for capitalist development in the fifteenth century, but the moment it became a historical fact, it became a necessary element in the lives of all those who were born into it. Similarly, once a Library of Congress Subject Heading - "illegal aliens" for example - has been chosen and inscribed within the *structure* of LCSH it becomes a necessary fact; the difficulty of changing an LCSH term is testament to the "stickiness" of historical necessity.

We can start to see, then, how particular structures - of language, of discourse, of particular texts - through their ability to persist over time and their relationships to other structures of power - have a causal effect both on identity and on social relations in the present. It is ironic that those who most vehemently deny the causal effects of structures are most reliant on particular texts - the US Constitution for example - for their understanding and negotiation with the present. No one would argue that the US Constitution and its related texts forms a structure that in large part determines the scope of action for everyone

who lives in the US. Indeed, the structure of slavery continues to exert enormous structuring power on American society, as the structures of the fur trade, residential schools, and the Indian Act continue to affect Canadian society.

But what material form do these structures take? The philosopher of science Roy Bhaskar distinguished between the causal structures of the social world and their concrete manifestations in the material world. It is these concrete manifestations that humans have direct access to - both producing and consuming them - and it is these manifestations that actually operate on us when we speak in terms of structural racism or sexism. How does Bhaskar characterize these manifestations?

## Material Manifestations of Social Structures

Bhaskar distinguishes between the *intransitive* objects of knowledge, the causal structures that exist in the physical or social world, and the *transitive* objects of knowledge, which are the products of human knowledge and work. Intransitive objects of knowledge do not depend upon human beings knowing them: they operate with or without our knowledge of them. Transitive objects of knowledge, however, are "the artificial objects fashioned into items of knowledge by the science of the day. They include the antecedently established facts and theories, paradigms and models, methods and techniques of inquiry available to a particular scientific school or worker" (Bhaskar 1975, p. 21).

What this means in fact is that, because we only have knowledge of the material world through the transitive objects of knowledge, all knowledge is pre-interpreted: there is no such thing as an objective fact independent of all theory or value. Bhaskar's goal is to recognize the pre-interpreted nature of knowledge while rejecting the hermeneutic idea that all there is is interpretation. He wants to support "the possibility of naturalism", that is he wants to construct a philosophy of social science which is non-positivist but also not (merely) hermeneutic.

But what happens to these transitive objects of knowledge once they are produced. What I want to argue is that they *reify*, they make real, they embody the social structures we have been talking about. In this sense, reification means the materializing in the world of immaterial (but causal) structures (cf Paolo Virno, *When the Word Was Made Flesh*). These objects formed what Sartre called the "practico-inert", the products of human labour, knowledge, and ideology which retain a power in the world even when their human authors are no more. Fredric Jameson describes the practico-inert as

matter which has been invested with human energy and which henceforth takes the place of and functions like human action. The machine is of course the most basic symbol of this type of structure, but it is really only a physical symbol of it, and in concrete daily life the practico-inert most frequently takes the form of social institutions. (Jameson 1971, pp. 244-245)

But it is a mistake, Jameson continues, to think of the objects that form the practico-inert and which have structurally determining effects over people as *really* transcending social relationship. Rather, the practico-inert is something that “functions like an institution” by “replac[ing] direct human relationships with something more ordered and more indirect” (Jameson 1971, p. 245)

And here is where the clue to structural oppression lies. Structural oppression is immaterial and formless, an abstraction, but it exists in the real world through the objects that embody it: HR policies, statistical methods, political and social ideology, newspaper reports, cultural artifacts, movies, TV, comic books; in fact all the “texts” that are produced in and by a structurally racist or sexist society. The objects are then explained away either as individual cultural products (i.e. the work of lone geniuses, or the products of idiosyncratic evil), or as functionally objective and unquestionable. Unjust laws, discriminatory policies, harmful language, may all be challenged on a case-by-case basis (if enough energy and solidarity can be mustered) but Law, Policy, and Language themselves are no-one’s responsibility. And yet they hold sufficient power to determine what is possible within our organizations and professions.

In an article published at the beginning of May, *Globe and Mail* columnist Campbell Clark identified a particular contradiction in testimony given by Justin Trudeau’s Chief of Staff, Katie Telford, on the sexual harassment scandal in the Department of Defense. Clark writes that Telford “made it clear that she thinks it’s unacceptable that men and women in uniform don’t have confidence in their institutions, and ‘that’s because the system for too long has allowed perpetrators to hide in HR processes while denying survivors the support they need’”. Clark argues that this is exactly what happened in the current case around Jonathan Vance, but that for Telford “there was nothing more that could have been done, because the HR processes were followed” (Clark 2021)

This is a clear example of the way social structures become embodied in the practico-inert, in this case HR policies. Because they are seen as objective and transcendental, policy becomes sacrosanct (and there is a whole social and political history of instrumental reason behind the valorization of policy and procedure, see (Popowich 2020)). The same happens with librarian evaluation procedures, or maternity leave policies, or EDI initiatives which, no matter how well-intentioned, become reified as part of the practico-inert, reinscribing structures of racial and sexual discrimination in seemingly objective documents and laws which brook no appeal. Following policies and procedures become a “neutral” value which - via the practico-inert - reinforces particular (and particularly oppressive) social structures.

## Conclusion

Hopefully this paper will clear up some of the ways “structure” has been understood within the humanities and the social sciences. Individual acts, individual products of labour, become historically sedimentated, confronting individuals as something necessary, something we are powerless to change. As a

result, the social values, views, and power dynamics become embodied in real concrete existing things, which then in turn bear down on what Archer calls the constraints and enablements of individuals.

So what can we do? How can we pursue social justice and equity, diversity, and inclusion in the face of the preponderant weight of the practico-inert? Mainly, we have to understand that these things are simply the reification of human social relationships. They need have no special meaning or allegiance or sacredness for us. But this understanding is not merely intellectual or idealistic, it's not a matter simply of thinking about our existing laws, policies, and procedures, differently. Rather we must learn how contingent they are *through the actual practice of changing them*. Otherwise, if we pursue EDI with the idea that our policies are legally or procedurally sacrosanct and untouchable, then we are condemned simply to perform EDI within the same structures of oppression those policies were developed in. The result can then only be trying to assimilate oppressed people into the same structures we claim to want to change.

And this, I think, is where the idea of "nothing about us without us", which first became prominent among disability activists, comes in. At the risk of reproducing the mistake Hall identifies and simply reversing the oppressive poles without changing the social relationships, I would suggest that precisely because they suffer from them, oppressed people are better able to interrogate, see through, and challenge the sanctity of the practico-inert. This is of course another abstraction and we must be careful about protecting real differences, but it is one of those useful abstractions to help us move forward in the necessary process of abolition and transformation.

## References

- Apea, Vanessa and Yize Wan (2021). *Yes, There Is Structural Racism in the UK – COVID-19 Outcomes Prove It*. en. <http://theconversation.com/yes-there-is-structural-racism-in-the-uk-covid-19-outcomes-prove-it-158337>.
- Archer, Margaret S. (2003). *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 978-0-521-53597-7. DOI: [10.1017/CBO9781139087315](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139087315).
- Bhaskar, Roy (1975). *A Realist Theory of Science*. Leeds Books.
- Clark, Campbell (2021). "Trudeau's PMO Can't Even See Its Own Contradictions on Sexual Misconduct in the Military". In: *Globe and Mail*.
- Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (2021). *Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities: The Report*. Tech. rep. London.
- Hall, Stuart (1993). "What Is This "Black" in Black Popular Culture?" In: *Social Justice* 20.1/2 (51-52), pp. 104–114. ISSN: 1043-1578.
- Jameson, Fredric (1971). *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- (1981). *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Cornell University Press.
- Leblanc, Daniel and Kristy Kirkup (2020). "RCMP Commissioner 'Struggles' with Definition of Systemic Racism, but Denies Its Presence in Organization". In: *Globe and Mail*.
- Li, Yanli (2021). "Racial Pay Gap: An Analysis of CARL Libraries". en-US. In: *College & Research Libraries* 82.3, pp. 436–454. DOI: [10.5860/crl.82.3.436](https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.82.3.436).
- Popowich, Sam (2020). "Lawful Neutral". In: *Real Life*.
- (Apr. 2021). "Canadian Librarianship and the Politics of Recognition". en. In: *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research* 16.1, pp. 1–23. ISSN: 1911-9593. DOI: [10.21083/partnership.v16i1.6126](https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v16i1.6126).