

Title	Where is the injustice in structural injustice?
Authors	Bufacchi, Vittorio
Publication date	2024
Original Citation	Bufacchi, V. (2024) 'Where is the injustice in structural injustice?', Philosophy and Public Issues, 2 (2), pp. 221-230. https://doi.org/10.17473/2240-7987-2024-2-2
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.17473/2240-7987-2024-2-2
Rights	© 2025, Vittorio Bufacchi. Originally published in Filosofia e Questioni Pubbliche - Philosophy and Public Issues. This article is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercial-ShareAlikes 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/legalcode.it
Download date	2026-08-09 07:04:44
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17177



Where is the Injustice in Structural Injustice?

Vittorio Bufacchi*

Abstract

This paper will offer a conceptual analysis and critique of Maeve McKeown's account of structural injustice. McKeown's main thesis is that structural injustice ought to be approached via critical theory, and that a critical theory of structural injustice should incorporate power. While I agree with McKeown's general approach, I argue that two aspects of this work remain opaque and in need of further analysis. First, while McKeown does a lot of important work on the 'structural' component of structural injustice, what constitutes an 'injustice' remains undefined, being taken for granted. More specifically, the concept of intentionality, which is crucial to McKeown's account of 'deliberate structural injustice', remains under analysed. Secondly, while McKeown rightly puts power at the centre of structural injustice, there seems to be an assumption that power and domination are cut from the same cloth. I will challenge this assumption, suggesting an alternative way of integrating power within the sphere of structural injustice.

Summary: Introduction. – The Main Thesis. – I. Structural Injustice: Does Intentionality Matter? – II. Where is the Injustice? – Conclusion. – Works Cited.

Introduction

Let me be as clear as I can be from the outset. This is a superb work of scholarship that ought to be read by anyone seriously interested in matters of social justice, and structural injustice in particular. Maeve McKeown (2024) has written the book that many of us working in the field have been waiting for at least since 1990, the year when Iris Marion Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference* was published. McKeown ought to be congratulated and praised for writing this book. If there is any justice in the world of academia,

* ORCID: 0000-0001-7236-117X.

this book will be recognised as a major achievement. Nothing I say in the following pages takes away from this verdict.

The Main Thesis

McKeown summarizes her book in one sentence: “My main thesis is that a critical theory of structural injustice should incorporate *power*” (2). There are two key terms here: ‘critical theory’ and ‘power’. By ‘critical theory’ McKeown is referring to the work by Margaret Archer, in particular her 1995 book *Realist Social Theory*. McKeown adopts Archer’s critical theory to correct certain aspects of Young’s work. The other key term is ‘power’, arguably the real protagonist in McKeown’s book, as McKeown indicates: “the aim of this book is to integrate power into structural injustice theory” (15). Regarding power, McKeown leans heavily on Thomas Wartenberg’s analysis taken from his book *The Forms of Power*.

With the help of these two authors, Archer and Wartenberg, and their respective accounts of critical theory and power, McKeown constructs an elegant, detailed analysis of structural injustice. According to McKeown, there isn’t just one but three types of structural injustice. In the first half of the book McKeown offers her original account of structural injustice. McKeown’s sophisticated philosophical approach to structural injustice is accompanied by many real-life examples, making her work accessible, relevant, and politically poignant: sweatshops; poverty; climate change; corporate abuse and exploitation. In the second half of the book McKeown theorizes responsibility for structural injustice. In what follows I will focus exclusively on the first half of McKeown’s book.

I. Structural Injustice: Does Intentionality Matter?

McKeown is inspired by the work of Iris Marion Young (1990). This is not surprising, since every scholar who writes about structural injustice today inexorably lists Young as their chief point of reference, and McKeown is not an exception to this rule. While this is perfectly understandable, it is also slightly disappointing. The idea of structural injustice predates Young, and no one should think that Young invented the concept or coined the term. Anyone familiar with the work of Marx knows that structural injustice has a long history.

Even if we disregard Marx’s observations that under capitalism *everyone* is

alienated, both capitalists and proletarians, hence the capitalist mode of production forms the structure within which injustice is articulate, and we ignore the works of other Marxists in the 20th century, starting with Rosa Luxemburg to Antonio Gramsci, there is an important literature in the late 60s and early 70s on structural injustice that seems to have gone under the radar. I'm referring to Johan Galtung and Newton Garver *in primis*. Although they write about 'structural violence' and 'institutional violence', they also have a very broad conception of violence which overlaps with injustice, in fact Galtung often uses the terms 'structural violence' and 'social injustice' interchangeably.

Johan Galtung (2009, 83) famously distinguished between 'direct violence', where the instigator of an act of violence can be traced to a person or persons, and 'structural violence', where violence occurs but cannot be traced back to any person who directly harms another person: "there may not be any person who directly harms another person in the structure. The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances". Working in a similar vein, Newton Garver (2009) distinguishes between four types of violence, creating a 2 X 2 matrix: violence can be personal or institutional, and it can be overt or covert.

I have always wondered why Young failed to engage with the works of Marx, Galtung or Garver in a meaningful way. Be that as it may, Young must be given credit for redirecting the vast literature on social justice to questions about social injustice, and more specifically on the structural basis of injustice. One of the things that is slightly disappointing about the current literature on structural injustice is that the reverence towards Young can reach levels akin to a religious cult. Her views are often endorsed and reiterated unapologetically without any hints of criticism. Thankfully this is not the case with McKeown. While McKeown is very approving of Young, it is refreshing to see that she is also not afraid to be critical of Young. In suggesting shortcomings in Young's work, McKeown is putting forward a constructive criticism with the aim of improving and strengthening Young's theory. This is exactly as it should be, and it's duly welcomed.

One of the major virtues of McKeown's book is to explore in greater detail the concept of 'structure', something that is often assumed to be self-explanatory in the literature on structural injustice. It isn't of course. As McKeown rightly points out, the interaction between structure and individual action remains under-analysed and in need of further clarification.

McKeown distinguishes between three types of structural injustice: pure, avoidable, and deliberate. Of these, deliberate structural injustice is perhaps the most interesting, but also the most problematic. 'Pure' structural injustice

captures the idea that social actors cannot escape from reproducing the injustice, therefore the consequences of their actions are unintended. ‘Avoidable’ structural injustice posits that not all agents are objectively constrained by the structures, allowing for the fact that some agents have the power to change the unjust structures but fail to do so, therefore the outcomes may be unintended but foreseeable and avoidable. ‘Deliberate’ structural injustice goes one step further. McKeown defines deliberate structural injustice as follows: “structural injustice is ‘deliberate’ when the unjust outcomes are intended because powerful agents benefit from it so they deliberately perpetuate it, and these agents have the capacity to remedy it but they fail to do so” (45).

The difference between pure, avoidable and deliberate structural injustice seems to come down to the levels of intentionality on the part of the social actors vis-à-vis the structures in which they operate: ‘Pure’ is unintentional; ‘Avoidable’ is unintentional but foreseeable; ‘Deliberate’ is intentional.

This typology is valuable, and McKeown ought to be congratulated for introducing these distinctions. But given the centrality of intentionality and unintentionality to her analysis, it is surprising that McKeown fails to expand on the concept of intentionality. We are in the realm of philosophy of action here, not political philosophy, nevertheless political philosophers disregard this body of literature at their own peril. There is also an interesting literature on intentionality in relation to acts of violence, in fact on the question of intentionality there are instructive parallels between structural injustice and violence.

In my book *Violence and Social Justice*, I argue that while most definitions of violence assume intentionality, in the sense that the action by X was undertaken with the deliberate aim of causing harm to Y, it is also possible and desirable to define violence as the outcome of an unintentional act (Bufacchi 2007).

Consider these three cases:

1. X performs action A with the intended aim of doing good to X but action A has the foreseen but unintended consequence of also harming Z.
2. X performs action A with the intended aim of doing harm to X but action A has the foreseen but unintended consequence of also harming Z.
3. X performs action A with the intended aim of doing *some* harm to X but action A has the foreseen but unintended consequence of doing *much greater* harm to X.

The concepts of intentionality and foreseeability are crucial here, furthermore these distinctions apply to structural injustice as much as to violence. In

philosophy of action the orthodox view (often associated with Donald Davidson) is that behind the idea of actions is the notion of agency, and intentionality implies reason: to say that person P acted intentionally is to say that P performed action A because P had a reason to A. But this view is not shared by everyone. Michael Bratman (1987) argues that apart from cases where action A is intentional whenever the agent performing the action intends to do A, there are also cases when what we do intentionally does not fully match with what we intended to do. Bratman is suggesting that we need to distinguish between what we do intentionally, and what is intended. When an intended action has foreseen but undesired side effects, the agent will have brought about the effects intentionally, but not to have intended to bring this about.¹ Given the central role of intentionality in McKeown's theoretical framework, it is surprising that this concept does not get the detailed analysis it deserves.

Leaving the question of intentionality aside, there is another issue regarding McKeown's concept of deliberate structural injustice worth considering. When political philosophers began to investigate the structural nature of injustice, one of the distinctive features of this concept was that no single person is responsible for the injustice. Thus, while there are many cases of single individuals deliberately acting in ways that cause or perpetuate an injustice on other individuals, in which case the injustice is strictly interpersonal, to think of injustice structurally was inviting us to switch our attention to the social, political, economic, and cultural context within which individuals operate. To put it bluntly, while interpersonal injustice has a distinct Kantian flavour (what make injustice wrong can be attributed to the reasons and the free will of its perpetrators), structural injustice has a manifest Marxist flavour (what make injustice wrong can be attributed to the context in which agents operate, in Marx's case the capitalist mode of production).²

This idea of structural injustice beyond intentionality is captured, for example, by Newton's Garver's concept of institutional violence. Garver (2009, 180) tells us that "the institutional form of quiet violence operates when people are deprived of choices in a systematic way by the very manner in which transactions normally take place, without any individual act being violent in itself or any individual decision being responsible for the system". But now

¹ On intentionality and foreseeability see also Gilbert Harman (1986) and John Harris (1980).

² Of course, this is assuming that Marxism is an ethical theory, and that a Marxist theory of social justice is not an oxymoron. We will not go there here, but for the records I'm with Norman Geras (1989) on this question.

McKeown's idea of deliberate structural injustice wants to reintroduce intentionality within the scope of structural injustice. While there are merits to this, there is also the risk that the most distinctive element of this injustice is stripped away. In other words, once the intentionality of the agent is part of the structural injustice equation, we are back in the realm of personal injustice. It is true that interpersonal injustice can be direct or indirect, and of course McKeown is trying to capture the way agents intentionally use certain structures to inflict an injustice, but sometimes I fear that the most radical dimension of structural injustice is compromised once personal intentionality is once again back in the fray.

II. Where is the Injustice?

As we have seen, much of the focus of McKeown's book is on the concept of structure in structural injustice. Here McKeown makes extremely useful observations that break new grounds in the literature on social injustice. Of course, the concept of 'structural injustice' is not only about the 'structure', it is also (arguably primarily) about 'injustice'. It is therefore surprising that while McKeown has a lot to say about structures, in some ways she has less to say about injustice. At the start of Chapter 2 McKeown writes: "Structural injustice, broadly speaking, is the fallout of social-structural processes that render groups of people vulnerable to domination or oppression" (19). I don't disagree with this, but 'vulnerability', 'domination' and 'oppression' are complex terms that need to be defined and analysed: vulnerable to what? Dominated by whom, and how? And who decides whether a group is oppressed or not? Also, why groups and not individuals? And finally, is injustice about 'rendering' groups vulnerable, or taking advantage of their vulnerability? I couldn't find satisfactory answers to these questions.

Later in the book McKeown expands on these issues, even though often by pointing the reader to the work of Young. Thus, in wording that echo Young's, McKeown says that "domination prevents individuals from determining how they will live their lives. Oppression prevents individuals from developing their unique capacities and fulfilling their personal potential" (p.36). I was not persuaded by Young's take on oppression, and I'm not convinced by McKeown's claims regarding domination either.³ Defining oppres-

³ For my critique of Young, see Bufacchi (2012).

sion in terms of personal potential not being fulfilled is highly problematic. I have never met a person who has fulfilled their personal potential, and if an injustice occurs whenever someone does not fulfil their personal potential, then we might as well just give up: injustice is ubiquitous and unstoppable, and will never be overcome.

Accidentally, the emphasis on one's personal potential being unfulfilled is also central to the views on social injustice and structural violence advanced by Galtung and his many followers. Thus, Galtung (1969, 168) writes that "Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations".⁴ Galtung's account of structural violence has been criticised on this issue, and rightly so, for being much too broad. The same criticism applies to Young on oppression and to McKeown on domination.

To give credit where credit is due, McKeown's account of structural injustice also has an appealing and innovative twist, for McKeown puts a great deal of emphasis on the concept of power, which distinguishes her work from Young's. I welcome this move, this is arguably the strongest aspects of McKeown's book, even though I have some reservations about McKeown's analysis of power.

First, following Wartenberg, McKeown seems to think of power in binary terms: there are the powerful, and the powerless. Once again, we find the fingerprints of Young on this dichotomy. Young (1990, 52) tells us that one of the five faces of the five faces of oppression is powerlessness: "The powerless are those who lack authority or power even in this mediated sense, those over whom power is exercised without their exercising it; the powerless are situated so that they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them". There is nothing wrong with this definition of powerlessness, but I also think that oppression is not so much about powerlessness, instead it is about disempowerment. The difference is subtle but important. While powerlessness denotes a state of affairs, or a state of being, disempowerment is an active process which delineates how power is taken away from someone. Disempowerment is dynamic, while powerlessness is static. I wish there was room for disempowerment and not only powerlessness in McKeown's analysis.⁵

Leaving aside the distinction between powerlessness and disempowerment, there is another issue regarding McKeown's account of power that I don't find

⁴ See also Jamil Salmi (1993).

⁵ I discuss social injustice in terms of disempowerment in Bufacchi (2012), pp. 14-15.

totally persuasive. Once again following on Wartenberg's footsteps, McKeown stresses the affinity between power and domination. In fact, McKeown goes as far as to adopt Wartenberg's definition of domination: "Domination refers to a relationship between social groups in which 'power is exercised by the dominating social agent repeatedly, systematically, and to the detriment of the dominated agent'" (p.39). While one can't deny that at one level power and domination are closely related, the two concepts should be distinguished. The move from power to domination is too quick, and potentially problematic on three accounts.

First, power is a dispositional concept. Peter Morriss (1987, 49), who wrote arguably still the best philosophical analysis of this concept, says that power is "a sort of ability: the basic idea is that your powers are capacities to do things when you choose". To think of power as an ability is not the same as saying that to have an ability is to have power. As Brian Barry (1988) rightly points out, 'power' and 'ability' are not interchangeable, and not all ability is power. For Barry (1988, 341): "there is more to (social power) than being able to do what you choose to do. Your having power entails that you have the ability to overcome resistance or opposition and by this means achieve an outcome different from the one that would have occurred in the absence of your intervention". The point about power being an ability is that the concept of power itself is normatively neutral, whereas domination has clear negative connotations.

Second, McKeown says that "the dominant agent does not need to issue a threat to coerce the subordinate, rather the dominant agent's ability to harm the subordinate is a structural feature of their relationship" (p. 39). This is true, but in that case, as Brian Barry (1980, 183) would say, the dominant agent is merely lucky, not powerful: "Must the power of a group be conceptualized as the sum of the power of each of the individual members of the group, or could a group be powerful whilst each of its members is individually powerless?". The difference between luck and power is analytically significant, in part because outcomes do not necessarily reveal power. Keith Dowding (2019, 47) offers a very good example to highlight the difference between outcomes and power: "If the conservative bloc on the Supreme Court have a clear majority, say six to three, then as a group the conservatives are clearly powerful. On all 'ideological' decisions they can get what they want. However each conservative Judge, as an individual, has exactly the same power as every other, and as each of the liberal Justices: viz. one vote each". This example also raises questions about the rudimentary relationship between domination and power.

Third, and perhaps more importantly, McKeown's account of power doesn't really tell us much about how power is used, or what forms it takes.

The point that McKeown wants to make is that some agents intentionally use or interact with existing structures in order to dominate others. I don't have a problem with this, in fact I agree with it. But we need to understand the ways in which agents use their power, or in other words we need to understand what is distinctive about their ability. Here it is important to distinguish between 'outcome power' (power *to*: the power to bring about outcomes) and 'social power' (power *over*: a social relation between at least two people). If we focus on social power, it is necessary to understand precisely what form social power takes.

Keith Dowding (2019, 48) has an interesting take on this: "Social power is the ability of an actor deliberately to change the incentive structure of another actor or actors to bring about, or help bring about outcomes". I think this is correct. The importance of Dowding's analysis is to remind us that too often we attribute power where it isn't there. In the literature this is referred to as the political power fallacy. Dowding (2019, 88) is right when he reminds us that the fact that actor A is powerless to bring about some outcome *x* does *not* imply that there is another actor B who is powerful enough to stop her. "The inference is false. Even if there is an actor B who is powerful enough to stop them bringing about *x*, the fact that A cannot do so is not sufficient to demonstrate that B is to blame". What Dowding is getting to here is that often what makes a certain group powerless is the fact that this group is unable to mobilize itself, that they struggle to overcome their own collective action problem. If certain individuals or another group benefits from this, they are simply lucky, not necessarily powerful. So how does power manifest itself? Dowding's answer is ingenious: an agent is powerful when they deliberately change the incentive structure of another agent so that they fail to mobilize, and remain victim of their own collective action problem. I find Keith Dowding's analysis of power very persuasive, and I believe it could be integrated within McKeown's theoretical framework to great effect.

Conclusion

McKeown has written an extremely important book, that one day may replace Young's work as the standard reference point on structural injustice. In this article I have raised some minor questions about the role of intentionality in the definition of structural injustice, and the ways in which power operates. But nothing I have written takes away from the immense value of McKeown's book, denoting a very significant contribution to contemporary political philosophy.

Works Cited

- Margaret Archer, Margaret. 1995. *Realist Social Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barry, Brian. 1980. "Is It Better To Be Powerful or Lucky?", Parts 1 and 2. *Political Studies* 28: 183-94 and 338-52.
- Barry, Brian. 1988. "The Uses of 'Power'". *Government and Opposition* 23 (3): 340–53.
- Bratman, Michael. 1987. *Intentions, Plans, and Practical Reason*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Bufacchi, Vittorio. 2007. *Violence and Social Justice*. London: Palgrave.
- Bufacchi, Vittorio. 2012. *Social Injustice: Essays in Political Philosophy*. London: Palgrave.
- Dowding, Keith. 2019. *Rational Choice and Political Power*. 2nd Edition. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Geras, Norman. 1989. "The Controversy About Marx and Justice", in *Marxist Theory*, edited by A. Callinicos. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Galtung, Johan. 1969; 2009. "Violence, Peace and Peace Research", in *Violence: A Philosophical Anthology*, edited by V. Bufacchi. London: Palgrave.
- Garver, Newton. 1968; 2009. "What Violence Is", in *Violence: A Philosophical Anthology*, edited by V. Bufacchi. London: Palgrave.
- Harman, Gilbert. 1986. *Change in View*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Harris, John. 1980. *Violence and Responsibility*. London: Routledge.
- McKeown, Maeve. 2024. *With Power Comes Responsibility: The Politics of Structural Injustice*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Morriss, Peter. 1987. *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*. 2nd Edition. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Salmi, Jamil. 1993. *Violence and Democratic Society*. London: Zed Books.
- Wartenberg, Thomas. 1990. *The Forms of Power: From Domination to Transformation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Young, Iris Marion. 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.