ELEONORA PIROMALLI
Sapienza University of Rome
eleonora.piromalli@uniroma1.it

STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE AND SUPRA-INDIVIDUAL ALIENATION: AN INQUIRY INTO THEIR INTERCONNECTIONS THROUGH THREE LITERARY EXAMPLES

abstract

The essay discusses the relations between structural injustice and objective alienation (also called supra-individual alienation): that is, a type of social alienation where human-established norms and practices are perceived as unchangeable external forces, necessary and prescribing adaptation. These rigidified and "naturalized" norms and practices often conceal and reinforce relations of structural injustice, and, in turn, are sustained by them. I aim at inquiring, also by applying an intersectional perspective, the theoretical and practical relations between the two: I highlight their mutual differences, explore their interconnections, and outline potential normative strategies for addressing them comprehensively. I do this with the help of fictional, but realistic examples taken from literary and philosophical works, such as Richard Wright's novel Native Son, *Theodor Fontane's* Effi Briest, *Doris Lessing's short story "To Room Nineteen", as well as examples provided by Iris Marion Young and Rahel Jaeggi.*

keywords

structural injustice; supra-individual alienation; direct domination; social oppression; intersectional identities

Phenomenology and Mind, n. 27 - 2024, pp. 40-51
DOI: 10.17454/pam-2705
https://www.rosenbergesellier.it/eng/journals/phenomenology-and-mind

ISSN 2280-7853 (print) - ISSN 2239-4028 (on line)

The focus of this paper is structural injustice considered in its relationship with social alienation, and specifically with supra-individual (or objective) alienation. As is known, structural injustice focuses on systemic and institutional arrangements within society that perpetuate unfairness, discrimination, and oppression: unlike personal or individual injustices, which can be attributed to the actions or intentions of specific individuals, structural injustice is deeply embedded in the social, economic, and political systems (Young, 2013; McKeown, 2021). Over time, structural injustices can have cumulative and compounding effects on marginalized or disadvantaged groups (Powers, Faden, 2019). Structural injustice, unlike its overt counterparts, operates within the framework of institutions and norms, rendering it less visible, but no less pernicious: it affects individuals' life trajectories, opportunities, and outcomes based on factors beyond their control, such as socio-economic background, race, gender, and other dimensions of identity, also intersectionally (Kelly, 2011).

The aim of this paper is to investigate how forms of structural injustice can be reinforced and perpetuated by phenomena of supra-individual alienation, also called objective alienation (Schaff, 1980, p. 111). Supra-individual alienation is a type of social alienation in which human-made institutions, practices, or belief systems, take on the appearance of external and necessary forces, unalterable by human beings. Differently from subjective alienation, which focuses on the feelings, the perceptions and the emotions of an individual, supra-individual alienation refers to large-scale social processes: processes such as, for example, the diffusion in society of norms, conventions, and practices that, although created and reproduced by human beings, come to be perceived by them as natural, uncontestable, unchangeable, and prescribing adaptation.[1] It is important to specify that not every social norm, convention, or established practice amounts to supra-individual alienation. Supra-individual alienation characterizes only those social norms and practices that, within a specific social context, are widely considered unquestionable and inevitable, or necessary due to some implicit, internal logic (Piromalli, 2023). Often, such norms and conventions are seen as deriving from nature or divine will, and, for this reason, are considered legitimate.

These rigidified, "naturalized" norms and practices often conceal and reinforce relations

1 The concept of alienation I utilize, therefore, is different from Jaeggi's (2014) appropriation-based idea of alienation and Lu's (2017; 2020) consideration of psychological alienation in the context of structural injustice. By consequence, the focus and the implications of our perspectives differ as well.

of structural injustice, and, in turn, are sustained by them (Piromalli, 2023). Hence, I aim to inquire how supra-individual alienation can both strengthen structural injustice and be strengthened by it. I will emphasize the distinctions between the two phenomena, both in theory and in social reality, discuss their interrelations, and sketch potential normative strategies for interventions designed to address them both. Given that structural injustice and supra-individual alienation are practical phenomena with tangible effects on both the structures of our society and individuals' lives, I believe their impact can be best examined through practical, albeit fictional, cases. To conduct my inquiry, I utilize literary examples drawn from Theodor Fontane's novel *Effi Briest*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Doris Lessing's short story "To Room Nineteen", as well as the famous example of Sandy presented by Iris Marion Young to depict structural injustice in *Responsibility for Justice*, and the case of the researcher who moves to the countryside developed by Rahel Jaeggi in *Alienation*.

In the first paragraph, I conceptually differentiate the categories of direct domination, structural injustice, and supra-individual alienation, as well as staring to inquire into their mutual relations. I do so through an analysis of the interactions between Jan, Mary, and Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, as well as through an examination of Theodore Fontane's novel *Effi Briest*, with specific focus on Innstetten's position as an "oppressed oppressor".[2] In the second paragraph, I continue my analysis of these categories and their interrelations by considering Doris Lessing's short story "To Room Nineteen". Finally, in the third paragraph, after further clarifying the concepts of supra-individual alienation and structural injustice by discussing examples provided by Iris Marion Young and Rahel Jaeggi, I suggest strategies for normative interventions in cases where structural injustice and supra-individual alienation are both present and mutually intertwined.

1. Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Theodore Fontane's *Effi Briest*: on the Relations Between Direct Domination, Structural Injustice, and Supra-Individual Alienation

The first literary example through which I would like to begin investigating the relationships between personal domination, supra-individual alienation, and structural injustice is taken from Richard Wright's *Native Son*. The novel is set in 1930s Chicago, a context characterized by racial segregation and deep-rooted systemic racism. The story revolves around Bigger Thomas, a young black man navigating daily racial discrimination and limited job opportunities, as he resides with his family in a cramped apartment within the city's black neighborhood. We could say that his situation reflects all five faces of structural oppression theorized in Young (1990): exploitation, powerlessness, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and violence. Bigger works as a chauffeur for the affluent Dalton family, including Mr. and Mrs. Dalton, and their daughter Mary. One evening, Mary asks Bigger to drive her and Jan Erlone, her boyfriend, to the South Side. Mary and Jan exhibit a friendly and informal demeanor toward Bigger: they ask him to address them by their first names, suggest they take the wheel, and propose a visit to a café in the working-class black neighborhood (Wright, 1940, pp. 58-61). Jan and Mary view the trip as a way to experience first-hand the lives of black individuals and to express solidarity with the black working class, as they openly challenge the prevailing hostility toward interracial interactions. In their naïveté and self-centeredness, they fail to consider that Bigger is forced to comply with their requests, which he finds overbearing, embarrassing, and intrusive: Jan and Mary's imposition of friendliness and camaraderie makes him feel deeply self-conscious of his black skin and of his social and racial subordination, arousing in him feelings of shame, inferiority, powerlessness, and hate.

2 I take this expression from Ypi (2020), who discusses Fontane's novel, and specifically the challenges Innstetten has to face, through the framework of structural injustice and psychological (not supra-individual) alienation.

> Why was Jan doing this? Why was Mary standing there so eagerly, with shining eyes? What could they get out of this? Maybe they did not despise him? But they made him feel his black skin by just standing there looking at him, one holding his hand and the other smiling. [...] He felt naked, transparent; he felt that this white man, having helped to put him down, having helped to deform him, held him up now to look at him and be amused. At that moment he felt toward Mary and Jan a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate (Wright, 1940, p. 58).

It comes as a surprise to Jan and Mary when, instead of accepting their friendliness with gratitude, Bigger reacts with increasing passive hostility. He resists entering the café, leading to Mary's tearful distress as she recognizes the discomfort they have imposed on him. In the end Jan, concealing his own embarrassment, orders Bigger to follow them into the café (Wright, 1940, p. 63).

In this scene we find a complex mix of personal domination, structural injustice, and objective alienation. At times, Jan's and Mary's socially, economically, and racially dominant position prevails over their resolutions, as they inadvertently give Bigger explicit orders: against their conscious intentions, the two white protagonists intermittently exert on him a form of direct, personal domination. We can define direct, personal domination as the situation in which a subject A forces a subject B to do something that B would not otherwise do (see for example Dahl, 1957); it is unidirectional in its orientation, as we have a clear divide between the dominated and the dominating subject.

In our scene, this direct domination is backed up, reinforced, and even made possible by a strong undercurrent of structural injustice, which, while of course not being personal, is unidirectionally constructed as advantage of a group A over a group B: Bigger has to take orders from Jan and Mary because, in the first instance, they are white and he is black in a structurally racist society. Their wealth also plays a significant role which is not devoid of structural implications, as Bigger's poverty is a direct result of the systemic economic and racial segregation experienced by Black individuals. As Iris Marion Young writes, "social injustice [...] exists when social processes put large groups of persons under systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time that these processes enable others to dominate or to have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising capacities available to them" (Young, 2023, p. 52).

But, in our scene, we also have an intricate network of norms, codes of behavior and routinary practices regulating everyday interactions between blacks and whites: in the context of the novel, these norms are generally perceived as logical, natural, and unalterable by both racial communities. In the narrated episode, they end up reasserting their power particularly when the two white characters, through their individual behavior, attempt to challenge them: despite all their efforts, the codes of conduct and the mutual assumptions deeply ingrained within both the members of the dominant and the subordinate group act as a necessary and unassailable force, foreign to the wills of the very individuals who try to resist them. Jan and Mary, even though they occupy a socially superior position, ultimately must come to terms with the anonymous power of social norms. No one can simply disregard them. As long as these norms are widely and diffusely considered logical, unchangeable, and necessary in society, they maintain their influence regardless of individual wills, acting as an external and foreign power. In contrast to what happens with direct domination and structural injustice, *both* the members of the dominant group and the subordinated group are subjected to this impersonal power, albeit in distinct ways. Bigger is subjected to it in his inner self, even before than in his external actions: in being forced by Mary and Jan to violate the norms that he has always had to follow, he experiences a sense of danger, confusion, and embarrassment,

while feeling acutely self-conscious of being black and of the social subordination attached to it (Wright, 1940, pp. 62-63).[3] Bigger's embarrassment and frustration is mirrored by Mary's and Jan's own, in noticing that the social codes they tried to do away with are reinstating themselves with full force, even in *their own* behavior (Wright, 1940, pp. 62-63). Finally, they realize that Bigger is confused, scared, and enraged by their actions, but they still cannot grasp that it is not towards him they should direct their frustration and disappointment: it is as if some foreign power, despite their actions and intentions, dominates them, even though they are part of the dominant group.

Relations of super-individual alienation in connection with structural injustice are also present in Theodor Fontane's 1895 novel *Effi Briest*. Effi, a seventeen-year-old, upper-middle-class girl in 19th-century Germany, is pushed by social conventions into a marriage of convenience with baron Geert von Innstetten, a much older man with a rigid and serious disposition. Effi must leave behind her loved ones to move with the baron to the cold and isolated provincial town he is the governor of, in a large, old house she believes to be haunted by ghosts. The baron, even though he loves Effi, often treats her with emotional distance, paternalism, or authority (Fontane, 1967, p. 45; 78-79; 68; 95-95; 99). He is frequently away for work and, fearing betrayal by his much younger and beautiful wife, manipulates Effi's childish beliefs about ghosts to keep her in a state of fear and submission (Fontane, 1967, pp. 59-60; 62; 78-79; 85; 138).

Driven more by boredom than desire, Effi eventually has a brief affair with major Crampas, a handsome friend of Innstetten. Even years after leaving the province and relocating with her husband and daughter to Berlin, Effi lives in fear that her brief affair with Crampas will be discovered by the baron. When this finally happens, Innstetten faces a dilemma. To restore his offended honor, the norms of the time require him to challenge his rival to a duel. However, seven years have passed since the betrayal; he loves his wife, understands the motives that led her to betray him, and wishes no harm to Crampas. He is also aware that, in challenging Crampas to a duel, he risks his own life. Even if he were to survive, he would still have to grapple with the remorse of taking an old friend's life. Moreover, he would be obliged, in line with the existing conventions, to disown Effi and part her from their daughter, causing immense suffering to both. He reflects with undersecretary Wüllersdorf on whether to arrange the duel or remain silent about the entire matter, pretending not to have discovered anything. These are the conclusions he reaches:

> It's got to be done, nevertheless. I've turned this thing over and over again in my mind. We're not isolated persons, we belong to a whole society and we have constantly to consider that society, we're completely dependent on it. If it were possible to live in isolation, then I could let it pass. [...] But with people living all together, *something has evolved that now exists and we've become accustomed to judge everything, ourselves and others, according to its rules*. And it's no good transgressing them, society will despise us and finally we will despise ourselves and not be able to bear it and blow our brains out. [...] There's no hatred or anything of that sort and I don't want to have blood on my hands merely for the sake of the happiness I've been deprived of, but *that something which forms society — call it a tyrant if you like — is not concerned with charm or love, or even with how long ago a thing took place*. I've no choice, I must do it (Fontane, 1967, p. 215, emphasis added).

3 For a detailed analysis on this point, see Burgum (1943) and Siegel (1974).

He, therefore, decides to challenge Crampas to a duel, with Wüllersdorf's bitter consent, who comments: "our own cult of honor [...] is idolatry. But we must submit to it, as long as the idol stands" (Fontane, 1967, p. 216). Innstetten will kill Crampas in the duel, living with remorse ever after; Effi will be dishonored and, estranged from her own family, she will suffer bitterly until her death.

Throughout the novel, we see instances of direct domination by Innstetten over Effi every time he imposes his will upon her, as we also witness structural injustice in the form of patriarchal domination. Effi – not primarily as the individual Effi, but as a woman – is subjected to male domination all her life. This is evident in her marriage out of convenience, in her dependence on her husband, in the social isolation that as a devout wife she must suffer in the "haunted house", on the harsh punishment she faces for her betrayal (also resulting in her separation from her daughter), and in her impossibility to rebuild her own life.

But there is also a pervasive supra-individual alienation that affects *both* the members of the dominant group and those of the dominated group, in the form of impersonal, unquestionable, and unalterable social norms. Despite being human creations, these norms exert an inflexible control over their creators. Even though, unlike Effi, Innstetten appears to have some degree of choice on how to react to events (Ypi, 2020), both him and Wüllersdorf agree that "that something which forms society – call it a tyrant if you like" (Fontane, 1967, p. 215) imposes to everyone a specific behavior. There is a set of seemingly inviolable and unchangeable rules dictating what a man in Innstetten's social position (constituting the epitome of social power and gender privilege) should say and do. These impersonal rules dominate him by compelling him to risk his life, first, and then to live with the remorse for Crampas' death and for the suffering caused to Effi and to the child.[4] As Ypi (2020) aptly asserted, Innstetten embodies the paradox of being an "oppressed oppressor". He stands as a member of the structurally dominant group, leveraging this advantage to exert personal domination over individuals in subordinated groups. However, he himself is subject to the overruling power of social norms. The same ideals of toxic masculinity that underpin his power and privilege, eventually dominate and oppress him through the social imposition of dueling to restore his honor; that is, through an objective social alienation of which he is well aware ("that something that forms society"), but to which he must submit.

Supra-individual alienation and structural injustice are often interconnected and mutually reinforcing; both, moreover, relate to intersectional identities. In Effi Briest we can find an example capable of illuminating this issue. In Effi's and Innstetten's society, implicit social norms dictate a certain "educational" paternalism from an older, socially dominant husband towards his young wife. Innstetten adopts this paternalistic attitude also in subtly reigniting Effi's fear of ghosts, in order to make her feel constantly controlled and secure her fidelity (Fontane, 1967, p. 138). Effi herself, however, replicates this same paternalistic approach – seen as equally "natural" and legitimate between the cultured, rich housemaker that she is, and her unsophisticated maid – with the servant Roswitha; Effi even alludes to supernatural, potentially controlling, and punitive entities, in an attempt to divert the maid from flirting with the coachman (Fontane, 1967, p. 163). Depending on the different facets of their intersectional identity and the structures of injustice governing them, the same person can find themselves in the dual role of both a target of oppression and an oppressor. Seemingly unquestionable norms of conduct, in this case the "educational" attitude reserved

4 For an in-depth analysis of the cultural, social, and ideological context in which the story is set, with particular reference to the codes of honor and the standards of masculinity, see Schneider (2002).

to the members of dominant groups, assist in these interwoven relations of domination and oppression.

2. Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen": Gendered Structural Injustice Obscured and Reinforced by the Alienation of the "Model Mother and Wife"

Structural injustice and supra-individual alienation can enable or facilitate forms of direct domination of an individual A over an individual B, but they can also occur separately from them. This point becomes particularly evident by considering Doris Lessing's short story "To Room Nineteen".

> The Rawlings' marriage was grounded in intelligence. [...] They married among general rejoicing, and because of their foresight and their sense for what was probable, nothing was a surprise to them. Both had well-paid jobs. [...] Both, before they married, had had pleasant flats, but they felt it unwise to base a marriage on either flat, because it might seem like a submission of personality on the part of the one whose flat it was not. [...] Everything right, appropriate, and what everyone would wish for, if they could choose. But people did feel these two had chosen; this balanced and sensible family was no more than what was due to them because of their infallible sense for choosing right. And so they lived with their four children in their gardened house in Richmond and were happy. They had everything they had wanted and had planned for. And yet...Well, even this was expected, that there must be a certain flatness...Yes, yes, of course, it was natural they sometimes felt like this. [...] Everything was in order. Yes, things were under control. So what did it matter if they felt dry, flat? (Lessing, 1966, pp. 267-268).

Both Matthew and Susan Rawlings, the husband and the wife, are incredibly cautious, perhaps overly so, in their effort to establish their relationship on an equal footing, prioritizing rational considerations over any impulses and desires. Thus, it looks like purely a matter of reason, guided by a rationality heavily influenced by the conventions of a patriarchal society, that Susan leaves her job to tend to the household and the children upon their birth: "children needed their mother to a certain age, that both parents knew and agreed on" (Lessing, 1966, p. 270). Matthew, never cold-hearted but firmly conventional in his beliefs, does not exert any direct domination over Susan; nonetheless, the conventions and social norms they both adhere to, favor him and disadvantage her. Susan quickly finds herself imprisoned, suffocated within the web of implicit impositions related to the role of the "ideal mother", "perfect wife", and "model homemaker" in an upper-middle-class family (Lessing, 1966, p. 293; see also Huang, 2023). She soon becomes a shadow of her former self: "she felt as if her shell moved here, with her family, answering to Mummy, Mother, Susan, Mrs. Rawlings" (Lessing, 1966, p. 294). The woman secretly yearns, without admitting it even to herself, for her family to disappear and free her from the prison of expectations, responsibilities, and norms of conduct that weigh her down, oppressing every personal aspiration of hers. In the context of this deeply entrenched system of injustice that structurally privileges men and disadvantages women, Susan does not even possess the epistemic categories to clearly express the harm she is experiencing, nor Matthew to fully understand her suffering and refer it to oppression, isolation, and powerlessness (as in Fricker's concepts of hermeneutical injustice; see Fricker, 2007, pp. 147-175). Both feel unhappy, empty, and lost: Matthew himself is oppressed by norms that appear natural, necessary, and undisputable.

> Nobody's fault, nothing to be at fault, no one to blame, no one to offer or to take it... and nothing wrong, either, except that Matthew never was really struck, as he wanted to be, by joy; and that Susan was more and more often threatened by emptiness. [...] There was no need to use the dramatic words [...]: intelligence forbade them. Intelligence

> barred, too, quarrelling, sulking, anger, silences of withdrawal, accusations and tears. Above all, intelligence forbids tears. A high price has to be paid for the happy marriage with the four healthy children in the large white gardened house. And they were paying it, willingly, knowing what they were doing (Lessing, 1966, p. 273).

Social norms, the relentless pressure to conform to rationality, intelligence, and propriety in what from the outside looks like as a well-matched upper-middle-class couple, also impose themselves on Matthew as incontestable codes of behavior, draining all life from his marriage: having to save the façade of peacefulness and rationality that characterizes their marriage; not indulging in self-commiseration and sentimentality; always striving to find practical, sensible solutions to problems that manifestly become more and more intractable by such solutions. Both Matthew and Susan are victims of supra-individual alienation, even in the absence of relationships of personal domination. Yet, as a woman trapped in a patriarchal system of structural injustice, Susan bears the greater burden. Much like in Effi's case, structural injustice reinforces prescriptive and pseudo-natural norms that primarily benefit the structurally dominant group, while alienation perpetuates, as natural and necessary, the specific practical relationships, assumptions, and expectations that rigidify the behavior of all groups and individuals. Eventually, Susan decides to retreat for several hours a day into a dingy hotel room ("room nineteen", precisely) under a false identity, just to savor what appears to her as freedom from all family ties and obligations. However, once her secret refuge is discovered by Matthew, who now believes her to be insane, Susan opts for what she perceives as her final liberation, suicide.

It is important to notice that, in Susan's case, the grip that supra-individual alienation and structural injustice hold over herself, and over women generally, is particularly insidious. We have seen that, both in *Native Son* and in *Effi Briest*, social norms clearly showcase their racist or sexist character: for instance, explicitly dictating that a black person should not dine at the same table with whites, or treat them with equality rather than subservience; similarly, women and wives are routinely deprived of the freedom to make their own choices, while their potential acts of infidelity are seen as crimes punishable by virtual exile from society and separation from all their loved ones. These social norms explicitly reflect the grounds of social injustice on which they are built, as well as the unequal relations of power in society. Of course, the same norms also veil the power relations and structural injustices they are founded upon, presenting them as normal, natural, and beyond questioning, but it is easy to perceive which group is advantaged, and which one is deprived. Instead, within Lessing's narrative, the structural injustice affecting Susan is *effectively* obscured by the societal norms she is expected to adhere to, and in a specific way. All explicit power differentials between groups seem detached from them, as women are recognized (while at the same time being limited, exploited, oppressed) as life creators, nurturing mothers, angels of the hearth, and devoted wives (see Friedan, 1963). The ideological recognition (Honneth, 2007) embodied in norms and roles has a very strong capability to both enable and, at the same time, conceal relations of structural injustice. These injustices are further obscured and perpetuated by the seemingly unchangeable and fixed nature of societal norms and roles – that is, by supra-individual alienation.

Hence, in multiple and varied ways (as seen through the examples taken from Wright, Fontane, and Lessing), supra-individual alienation makes structural injustices more challenging to identify, criticize, and redress. As systemic injustice manifests itself through seemingly natural and unalterable norms, behaviors, assumptions, and expectations, individuals themselves unknowingly perpetuate and validate it: the same subjects who are

victims of supra-individual alienation reproduce its power, and the power of structural injustice, over themselves and society.

3. How to Address Structural Injustice, Supra-Individual Alienation, and Their Interrelation?

At this point, on the basis of the three examples considered above, one might wonder if super-individual alienation and structural injustice always occur together. If one exists, does the other necessarily follow, and vice versa? Even though both are present in every example made thus far, the answer is negative: on the one hand, super-individual alienation can exist without the presence of structural injustice among the individuals and social groups involved. On the other hand, significant structural injustice can occur independently of supra-individual alienation. To illustrate the first case, we can refer to an example present in Rahel Jaeggi's *Alienation*. It presents us with young researcher who, upon securing a professorship and starting a family, willingly transitions from a flexible and carefree lifestyle to a structured routine. Soon he becomes estranged from this new life, which is driven by social conventions and a rigid idea of what one "should do" at his age (Jaeggi, 2014, p. 52). This happens even though he occupies a relatively privileged economic and status position: he is not a victim of structural injustice, neither in this nor in other respects. In this case, as in others, forms of supra-individual alienation affect individuals who are not subject to structural injustice.

But the opposite can also happen: instances of structural injustice can arise without alienation, such as in the example of Sandy, through which Iris Marion Young, in her *Responsibility for Justice*, presents the concept of structural injustice. Sandy, a single mother with two children and a regular job, faces housing problems when her rented apartment is put up for sale at an unaffordable price. Despite kind and cooperative real estate agents, she struggles to find affordable housing within safe areas for her children. After an exhaustive search during the eviction notice period, she rents a small apartment in an outlying area without access to public transport, and buys a car on installments. However, due to the standard demand for a deposit equivalent to three months' rent, a sum she lacks after paying the first car installment, Sandy and her children find themselves homeless after the eviction notice period expires (Young, 2013, pp. 43-44).

Structural injustice cannot be ascribed to the actions or intentions of specific individuals, as it emerges clearly from Iris Marion Young's example of Sandy; it can therefore exist independently of relationships of direct domination. Direct domination, super-individual alienation, and structural injustice are three distinct concepts. At the same time, however, members of structurally oppressed groups can more easily become victims of forms of direct domination: we have seen this happen in the case of Bigger Thomas, who as a member of a structurally dominated group is easily subjected to forms of direct domination, and in the case of Effi, whose needs and opinions are often ignored or vilified by her husband. Structural injustice and direct domination exhibit a unidirectional vector: in both cases, domination is inflicted by an individual or group A on an individual or group B.

Unlike structural injustice and direct domination, supra-individual alienation affects instead, to varying degrees and in different forms, both dominators and dominated: it is not unidirectional, and this implies that each subject can suffer its consequences while simultaneously reproducing it. Supra-individual alienation can also manifest itself independently of structural injustice and direct domination, as in Jaeggi's example of the researcher moving to the countryside. However, when supra-individual alienation occurs within the context of structural injustice, the social norms embodied in it will likely be more oppressive for the structurally dominated group: both Susan and Effi, as women in a patriarchal society, bear the brunt of the coercive practices and codes of behavior of their times; Susan, as we have seen, is also subjected to forms of ideological recognition embodied in social norms and roles. Social norms and prescriptions can also hide structural injustice and

direct domination (even violence) by shifting responsibility from oppressors to oppressed, as in the despicable and still common recommendation to women not to dress revealingly in order not to be raped. This prescription is still perceived as logical, obvious, and natural in many social contexts, by both men and women.

What can we deduce from all of this, for the critique and rectification of injustice? A first point is that, to change existing relationships – be they relations of structural injustice, supra-individual alienation, or a combination of these – it is not enough to change one's personal conduct. Simply modifying individual behaviors can even prove counterproductive. In *Native Son*, Jan and Mary naïvely seek to transcend the racist relationships and norms prevailing in their society; they have, to some extent, pierced the veil of super-individual alienation that gives an appearance of naturalness and legitimacy to those social norms, and now they attempt to defy them. The scene narrated by Richard Wright illustrates the failure of their attempt. The social codes governing the interactions between the structurally dominant and the dominated group are so ingrained in that context, so natural to Jan and Mary (as well as to Bigger), and so embodied in them as a second nature, that these same codes continue to function as an impersonal social force, foreign to the conscious will of all characters.

Change cannot only rely on the efforts of individuals: it must be systemic. Normative action, moreover, always needs to be preceded by an analysis of the specific situation at hand, on a case-by-case basis, as this can lead to better strategies of intervention. Such analytical process is crucial for assessing the respective presence of direct domination, structural injustice, and supra-individual alienation within the given context, and for comprehending their mutual, practical interconnections. It should always be kept in mind that norms and practices socially considered as unquestionable and unchangeable often play a role in obscuring structural injustice: the latter, therefore, could not be always apparent at first sight. Regarding the general relationship between structural injustice and supra-individual alienation in practical cases, instances of structural injustice may at times carry more weight, requiring thereby a stronger normative attention. These, in turn, may be reinforced by forms of supra-individual alienation, namely by social norms, assumptions, and expectations assumed as natural facts. In other cases, the primary focus might be to intervene on the forms of supra-individual alienation that hide and perpetuate relationships of structural injustice through the routine actions and beliefs of the individuals involved. In each of these scenarios, an initial analysis of the interaction between the two components and their relative weight within the relationships at issue can provide a better understanding of the concrete phenomena at play, contributing thereby to a more effective normative action.

While it remains necessary to consider each case on its own merits, we can outline a fundamental difference depending on whether, in a specific scenario, the predominant aspect is that of supra-individual alienation or structural injustice. Prioritizing the countering of supra-individual alienation means systematically addressing, in a long-term and broad-ranging perspective, the discriminatory and alienating thought patterns diffusely present in society. The main focus, without which any other intervention will have little impact, here is to lead people to an awareness of how the norms, institutions, and behaviors they perceive as natural and immutable are human creations, and, as such, transformable and amendable in relation to forms of racism, discrimination, sexism, etc. The drive for this can stem from social movements that recognize the contingent and oppressive nature of seemingly "natural" norms in society, as demonstrated by the feminist movement. This impetus can also be strengthened by institutions that promote concrete and progressive policies. Conversely, primarily addressing structural injustice involves tackling the economic, social, and cultural power relations within society. Such relationships are often interconnected with supra-individual alienation and reinforced by it. Therefore, awareness of the normatively unjust

character of these relations is necessary, especially when hindered by forms of ideology or alienation; in these cases, combating structural injustice also involves confronting supra-individual alienation. However, the primary focus here should be on concrete transformative interventions – including redistributive measures, but not limited to them – aimed at rectifying the current situation. Also in this case the initial impetus may come from groups and social movements that manage to draw attention to their demands. However, in many instances of struggle against structural injustice, given the need for structural interventions in society, impactful and conclusive solutions often will only be achieved through the systematic intervention of political institutions. Either way, the fight against these two forms of normatively pathological relationships (supra-individual alienation and structural injustice) must proceed hand in hand, although it may involve differentiated strategies to some extent. Supra-individual alienation and structural injustice often intertwine and mutually reinforce each other, although their relationship is not always straightforward, as previously discussed. Therefore, it is crucial to define and articulate these concepts clearly at a theoretical level, while also exploring their diverse interactions in social reality. This essay aims to contribute to this goal.

REFERENCES

Burgum, E. B. (1943). The Promise of Democracy and the Fiction of Richard Wright. *Science & Society*, 7(4), 338-352;

Dahl, R. A. (1957). The Concept of Power. *Behavioral Science*, 2(3), 201-215;

Fontane, T. (1967). *Effi Briest*. Harmondsworth: Penguin;

Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press;

Friedan, B. (1963). *The Feminine Mystique*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company;

Jaeggi, R. (2014). *Alienation*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press;

Honneth, A. (2007). *Recognition as ideology*. In B. van den Brink & D. Owen (Eds.), *Recognition and Power* (pp. 323-347). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press;

Huang, Z. (2023). Body as a Metaphor in Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen". *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews, 36*(3), 434-443. DOI: 10.1080/0895769X.2021.2007752;

Hunter, E. (1987). Madness in Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen". *English Studies in Africa, 30*(2), 91-104. DOI: 10.1080/00138398708690842;

Kelly, U. A. (2011). Theories of Intimate Partner Violence. Intersectionality as an Analytic Framework. *Advances in Nursing Science, 34*(3), 29-51. DOI: 10.1097/ANS.0b013e3182272388;

Lessing, D. (1966). *To Room Nineteen*. In D. Lessing, *A Man and two Women* (pp. 267-304). London, UK: McGibbon & Kee;

Lu, C. (2017). *Justice and Reconciliation in World Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press;

Lu, C. (2020). Structural injustice and alienation: A reply to my critics. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy, 23*(4), 544-555;

McKeown, M. (2021). Structural injustice. *Philosophy Compass*, 16(7), 1-14. doi:10.1111/phc3.12757;

Piromalli, E. (2023). L'alienazione sociale oggi. Una prospettiva teorico-critica. Roma: Carocci;

Powers, M., & Faden, R. (2019). *Structural Injustice: Power, Advantage, and Human Rights*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press;

Schaff, A. (1980). Alienation as a Social Phenomenon. Oxford, UK: Pergamon Press;

Schneider, J. (2002). Masculinity, Male Friendship, and the Paranoid Logic of Honor in Theodor Fontane's Effi Briest. *The German Quarterly*, 75(3), 265-281;

Siegel, P. N. (1974). The Conclusion of Richard Wright's "Native Son". *PMLA*, 89(3), 517-523;
Wright, R. (1940). *Native Son.* New York and London: Harper & Brothers;
Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press;
Young, I. M. (2013). *Responsibility for Justice*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press;
Ypi, L. (2020). *Oppressori oppressi*. In S. Petrucciani (Ed.), *Potere, autorità e libertà* (pp. 13-27). Milano: Mimesis.