Reason and Power: Difference, Structural Implication, and Political Transformation

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**Abstract:** One of the central issues facing contemporary political theory is the problem of *difference*. This problem is perhaps clearest in disagreements regarding the role of pluralism between advocates of deliberative, and agonistic, approaches to democracy. Deliberative democracy has, according to agonists, only paid lip-service to pluralism, by emphasising agreement, consensus, and universalism. Instead, according to advocates of agonistic democracy, we should accommodate incommensurable difference as central to political organisation, but this shift threatens to emphasise particularity at the expense of commonality, so preventing the transformation of social positions. These debates turn largely around the ways in which power is conceived in relation to democratic interaction, with deliberativists emphasising ideals of free and equal discourse, and agonists, the irreducible role of power. I begin by outlining a structural approach to social power, to show how we are all structurally implicated in power relationships. I go on to show how emphasising structural implication shifts us beyond debates that revolve around difference, drawing attention to the more foundational problem of how agents may come to understand these structures and each other, in ways that surpass or transcend the specific constraints acting upon them. Considering this, I develop a complex account of structural implication that emphasises the complexity of relationships between social norms, reasoning, and objective power relationships before showing how this approach illuminates lacunae in similar approaches, particularly regarding the way in which structural power disenables us from often seeing structural imbalances of power, and clarifies the ways in which collective political transformation is possible.

**Keywords:** Structural Power, Difference, Reasoning, Freedom

# 1. Introduction

One of the central issues facing contemporary political theory is the problem of *difference*. This problem is perhaps clearest in disagreements regarding the role of pluralism between advocates of deliberative (Dryzek, 2000), and agonistic (Mouffe, 2000), approaches to democracy. The work of Habermas (Habermas, 1984, 1996), for example, has often come under criticism (Johnson, 1998; Rienstra and Hook, 2006) whilst leaving its central concern intact: that political decisions require a consensus achieved through rational discourse. Mouffe’s (Mouffe, 1999, 2000) criticisms of deliberative democracy go beyond these, most prominently arguing that the approach fails to adequately deal with the problem of *power*, and so fails to get to grips with the political realm *at all*. For, ‘agreement that is justifiable solely by reasons in light of generalisable interests of the relevant parties’ (Johnson, 1998, p. 173), rests upon an account of consensus determined in a space of deliberation that is free and equal. But, by emphasising such universal principles, the view has neglected our situatedness, and in so doing, reinforces the power relations that exist between us. As such, according to Mouffe, deliberative democracy has only paid lip-service to difference, by emphasising agreement, consensus, and universalism. As Mouffe argues, the ideal of universal consensus belies the fact that consensus is often achieved through the exercise of power, and furthermore that the fundamental space of political deliberation is not one in which power can be eliminated. Indeed:

In all cases they are abstracted from social and power relations, language, culture and the whole set of practices that make the individuality possible. What is precluded in these rationalistic approaches is the very question of what are the conditions of existence of the democratic subject. (Mouffe, 2000, p. 95)

That is, the problem of difference comes to the fore when we consider, not standard notions of power as wielded by sovereign or institutional force, which may be overcome, but the practical relationships of power that exist across our social lives (Tully, 2008).

In light of this, in §.2, I outline a structural approach to social power as developed primarily by Iris Young as a ‘function of dynamic processes of interaction’ (Young, 1990, p. 33). I show how, on this approach, we are all structurally implicated in power relationships, and, as such, we need to reconsider the intersubjective norms and material conditions that give structure to our interactions. It is necessary to consider these power relations, since both the appeal to an idealised universal subject free from power, and the appeal to situatedness in structures, can lead to the substantiation of actually existing structures. Put another way, to think of a possible subject free from power relations, just as to think of subjects fixed by power relations, is problematic since they provide no traction on what it might mean to modify those power relations. The latter position is taken by advocates of agonistic democracy, with the suggestion that we should accommodate incommensurable difference as central to political organisation. As such, emphasising structural implication shifts us beyond debates that revolve around difference, drawing attention to the more foundational problem of how agents may come to understand these structures and each other, in ways that surpass or transcend the specific constraints acting upon them. So, in §.3., I develop a more complex account of structural implication than Young’s, emphasising relationships between social norms, reasoning, and objective power relationships. In §.4., I show how this approach illuminates lacunae in similar approaches, particularly regarding the way in which structural power disenables us from often seeing structural imbalances of power, and clarifies the ways in which reasoning is involved in collective political transformation.

# 2. The problem of structural implication

## 2.1. What is structural implication?

According to Young (Young, 2013), if we are to deal with oppression and social asymmetry, then we cannot devote our attention only to individual responsibility or formal systems of power. For example, Rawls famously discussed the idea of a ‘basic structure’, which is a fundamental structuring set of institutions that may be criticised in terms of whether or not they are ‘just’, and so on. But, as Young argues, it is an error to think it possible to demarcate structure in this way, since structural processes are not delimited by a small set of fundamental institutions:

Social structures are not a part of the society; instead they involve, or become visible in, a certain *way of looking* at the whole society, one that sees patterns in relations among people and the positions they occupy relative to one another. (Young, 2013, p. 70)

Young outlines the ways in which human institutions, behaviors, and interactions constitute a social structure in which agents are positioned, emphasising that structures are *processes*, rather than static and unrevisable, though they often *appear* to be so (Young, 2013, p. 55). These structural processes cut across social strata and institutions, so, for example, we are materially and economically positioned in multiple ways, whilst we are also positioned by the background norms of cultural assumptions, decisions, and institutions. These intersect in different ways, so the fact that 41% of black people aged between 20 and 24 were out of work and out of education in Chicago in 2014 (Cordova and Wilson, 2016), can only be analysed by considering past actions of governance (both local and national), mediatisation, cultural norms, economic and housing deprivation of inner-city Chicago, and so on. Some of these structural processes are reinforced by legal systems, whilst some are reinforced almost by ‘habit’, but it is the confluence of these processes that, normatively structuring the contours of people’s lives, have objective effects.

Structures are *recursive*, then, as Sewell (Sewell Jr, 1992) argues, and so where structures ‘look’ to be entrenched and objective, this is the result of a matrix of processes and power relationships that require ongoing maintenance through material and normative force. Taken together, this gives us a picture of structural power, that is not merely constraining, or reinforcing (Frye, 1983, p. 11). As such, we can understand social structures in terms of an uneven landscape in which certain behaviours are made much more likely and possible, whilst others, if not ruled out altogether, become much more difficult for certain groups of agents. As such, Young defines structural *injustices* in terms of these capacities:

Structural injustice exists when social processes put large categories of persons under a systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time as these processes enable others to dominate or have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising their capacities. (Young, 2006, p. 114)

The effects of these systems are, therefore, to constrain, guide, and shape the possible actions of agents, not through a system of causal determination, but through the shaping of the landscape, or sets of structures, in which we are all situated. For, it is in these relationships, and through these background norms, that our social positions are shaped, and reshaped.

What is most difficult about the above analysis of structural power, but inadequately emphasised, is that we are all *structurally implicated* in these structural processes, and that we are therefore all involved in some aspects of their reinforcement, however partial this may be. For, these processes rely upon continual action for their support, even where background norms are highly sedimented, as is often the case in legal and political institutions, for example. So, our everyday practices are continually involved constitution of those structures, and, as Young argues, most structural injustices are ‘produced and reproduced by thousands or millions of persons usually acting within institutional rules and according to practices that most people regard as morally acceptable’ (Young, 2013, p. 95).[[1]](#endnote-1) The kind of implication that I am interested in here, is the way in which we, through our everyday practices, in following certain rules, or in acting according to accepted norms of the communities in which we live, reinforce processes that contribute to the existing landscape of power. Often these result from assumptions that are largely unconscious, actions and reactions in our everyday interactions, as well as mediatised (re)production of stereotypes. These practices pass by unnoticed, for the most part, and are enacted by people who have little awareness of the operation of such oppression. But, as such, dealing with structural implication is tricky to say the least, since the social landscape is complex: ‘[o]ppression is filled with such contradictions because these approaches fail to recognise that a matrix of domination contains few pure victims or oppressors’ (Collins, 2002, p. 287). For example, the issue of the ‘invisibility’ of structural processes brings to light the ways in which our interactions are always already constrained by the relations in which people are positioned, both prior to such interactions, and which are also often reinforced by those interactions. It is important, therefore, that we consider not just interactions between individuals, but the complex ways in which these interactions are sculpted from the outset.

## 2.2. Beyond consensus and difference

Considering structural implication clarifies what is at stake in the debate between positions that require the positing of a universal subject (such as Habermas’), and positions that deny recourse to universal, or even normative, claims (such as Mouffe’s).

There are well-worn arguments against the abstract universalism at work in Habermas’ approach to deliberation (Habermas, 1984), emphasising the exclusion of agents, viewpoints, and specific interests, together with a subsequent masking of that exclusion. For example, appeals to impartiality, according to Young (Young, 1990, p. 101), reduce a plurality of social positions to form a singular basis for subjectivity, and so ultimately *assimilates* the identity of the ‘other’ to the identity of the ‘one’ (Benhabib, 1992). Thinking of deliberation as free from specific interests and identities (Rawls, 1993) to construct universal political judgements thereby excludes multiple forms of reasoning, norms, and identity positions, as external to a specific set of reasoning practices *as if they are universal across all people and at all times* (Tully, 2008, pp. 98 - 99).

But, if the above story about structural implication is correct, it seems that *even in cases where discourse appears egalitarian and unconstrained*, there will be imbalances of power that shape that discourse in ways that are not visible to us. Moreover, we would have no way of getting any traction upon those imbalances from within the confines of discourse, such that they may be criticised and questioned (Mouffe, 1999). Resultantly, not only are our political judgements deprived of the capacity and context to transform excluded practices, identities, and interests, but even those practices that *are* supposedly rational, may simply shore up power relations by validating current social norms. Appealing to a domain of communication that is neutral, beyond identity and interests, would then elide structural implication altogether, so attempting to remove deliberative discourse from ‘actual’ socio-political interaction whilst also providing no political purchase on structural implication, so that we may hope to transform it.

Mouffe, *prima facie*, accepts the above line of argument, arguing, for example, that actual political disagreements occur in spaces that are constructed around tensions and oppositions, so any consensus is achieved through the imposition of power (Mouffe, 2000, p. 49). As such, Mouffe argues that incommensurable difference is an indisputable fact of social life, and should be understood as a *condition* for politics (Mouffe, 2000, p. 33). In this sense, Habermasian approaches are both *empirically* false, since there are no deliberative spaces beyond power, and *transcendentally* wrong, since conflict and opposition are *constitutive* of politics *tout court*. So, whilst Mouffe’s argument for ‘renouncing the illusion that we could free ourselves completely from power’ (Mouffe, 1999, p. 753) is consistent with the structural approach to power discussed above, her positive political project ultimately *reduces* the political to power.

To say that politics is nothing other than ‘successful power’ (Mouffe, 1999, p. 753), where political norms can be reduced to power relations (Mouffe, 2000, p. 49), is distinct both from the claim that the deliberative model fails to adequately capture reasoning, and also the idea that, because of structural implication, reasoning and power are not fully extricable. The former is problematic for Mouffe’s view that politics is a critical project in which the suppression and oppression of any agents is questioned and struggled against (Mouffe, 2000, p. 19). Denying recourse to normative claims in the context of structural imbalances of power may offer no means by which to modify and surpass those imbalances, whilst also occluding the social positions that structure our actions and interactions. The empirical observation that power-relations are systemic across the social field does not, by itself, provide any analysis of specific power formations that could lead to their transformation. Rather, this requires an ability to construct criteria for the judgment of constellations of power, that do not rest upon normative commitments.

The problem that structural implication poses is acute here: for critically transformative projects to get off the ground, it must be possible to make normative claims that are irreducible to current social configurations and structures of power, yet also not immune from them. That is, we need to bring together reason and power, without reducing either one to the other.

# 3. Social complexity and normativity

Given the problems identified above by foregrounding structural implication, in this section, I develop a more complex account of structural implication than Young’s, emphasising the complexity of relationships between social norms, reasoning, and objective power relationships. The aim is to articulate an account that neither reifies norms of reason to universal status, nor reduces them to specific social practices. To do this, I argue against the dichotomy of reason and power by arguing for an interactional approach to norms of reason that *internalises* power without being reducible to them.

## 3.1. Complexifying structural implication

Let us consider the structure of the *social* on Mouffe’s account. The line of critique above argues that for a Habermasian approach, a local set of norms becomes entrenched as a horizon for political discourse through processes of exclusion and subsequent masking of that exclusion. This is a kind of universalisation, but only as a ramping-up of local conditions. What is troubling about Mouffe’s response is that it has a similar logic, though oriented toward difference. According to Mouffe, difference is both the condition of the social, whilst also undermining the possibility of a *unified* social realm (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 125). So, for example, whilst Mouffe’s agonism seems to *require* a shared symbolic space for any political movement (Erman, 2009), any stable space of social meanings is disavowed in her argument against Habermas. To deal with this, Mouffe argues that a shared symbolic space can be understood as a discursive articulation of ‘forms of life’, without any kind of ‘intellectual foundation’ (Mouffe, 1999, p. 749). But, this does little to deal with the problems discussed in the previous section, however, which are here compounded by the denial of any meaningful significance of the extra-discursive (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 107). As such, there are no tools to account for any external factors in the construction of such discursive articulations (Stavrakakis, 2002, p. 67), nor the way in which meanings are moulded by power structures that are not purely discursive. This is not incidental to Mouffe’s account, it is part-and-parcel with the requirement that difference and particularity are the *ground* of discursive articulations, that they cannot be caused by objective or normative factors.

Due to structural implication, even if we accept Mouffe’s account of ‘forms of life’, there is no reason to think that these are would not be shaped by power. Nor, then, is there any reason to think that such ‘forms of life’ could be discontinuous with broader social systems and norms. Indeed, it must be possible for local spaces of meaning to gain traction on wider structural and normative contexts to determine the content and position of our local antagonisms. Otherwise, as Joseph points out; ‘any clash or rivalry between discourses becomes incomprehensible since there is no intelligible way of comprehending either discourses themselves or conceptual transformations’ (2000, p. 113). Without this, we could not understand local antagonisms, how they are constituted, and how they are interwoven with broader social systems and norms. This risk is that we do not have the tools to transform social meanings or structures since we have neither an account of the conditions of their possibility, nor of any normative system that we might employ to transform them. In other words, both the Habermasian approach *and* Mouffe’s tend towards a position in which a local context determines the horizon of the political, so biasing them towards the status quo (Finlayson, 2015).

There are two interrelated issues here. The first requires us to construct an account of norms that can deal with problems of structural implication and shared meaning, and the second, an account of structure as both discursive and extra-discursive, in which transformation may occur through our social encounters *and* technical and material change. This latter point is important since it surpasses Young’s reliance upon Giddens’ account of structuration, as well as Mouffe’s account of discursive articulation (Elder-Vass, 2010). Both Giddens and Mouffe aim to avoid a monolithic idea of society without reducing social structures to individuals. But, for Giddens, social structures exist only in the practices and minds of the human agents involved in its reproduction (Giddens, 1984, p. 17). For Mouffe (with Laclau), social structures may be understood in terms of ‘differentiation within the social production of meaning’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 107). So, both neglect the ways in which social and material structures influence and sculpt those practices and meanings from ‘determinate structural locations and the materiality of structural elements’ (Boucher, 2009, p. 99).

Perhaps the most significant attempt to deal with this problem in recent literature is Elder-Vass’ account of the complexity of social structures. From similar criticisms of Giddens’ account, Elder-Vass develops a view in which events ‘…are the product of multiple interacting causal powers, including the powers of individual agents and social structures, and indeed other material objects’ (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 12). The resultant account is not merely dual, but complex, in which interactions occur across complex material and normative systems, and these interactions give rise to emergent structures. Where for Mouffe the social world is just a series of discursive articulations, on this view, it is composed of ‘overlapping and intersecting groups’, the behaviour of which is multiply determined in the sense that, whilst social practices are shaped by institutions and structures, those practices may not comply with, or reinforce those structures. This begins to give us a picture of complex structures involving material systems and intersubjective norms, and where pre-existing social structures shape social practices, whilst those social practices both reproduce and transform the same structures (Joseph, 2000).

## 3.2. Socialising norms

Let us return to the problem of norms identified above, which is now sharpened, since it can be understood in the context of such social complexity and material conditions. On the picture of structural implication developed above, there will be social norms already in place that shape our practices and social interactions, where these norms are neither explicit rules, nor a matter of communal agreement. Rather, they are constantly given shape, and reshaped, through our interactions with each other in complex social structures. Our social practices can be understood in terms of this complex social space, sculpting possibilities for action and interaction regarding what is treated as normal and abnormal, reasonable and unreasonable.

We can fruitfully explore these ideas through Robert Brandom’s distinct (to Mouffe’s) interpretation of Wittgenstein’s language games. The norms of our interactions, for Brandom, are generated by the practices of language games, which are always socially embedded. So, our interactions are constrained by discursive norms, whilst also reinforcing, and revising, those very norms. It is our interactions with each other through which these norms are given life, and in which, as Brandom (Brandom, 2000, p. 179) suggests, those norms are also transformed by the novelty of our dialogue. This gives us a way to think of our interactions taking place against a background of norms regarding acceptable linguistic activity, the use and application of terms, the associations between our terms, and so on. As such, our understanding of each other is always constituted in the *inter-* of our interactions, which is of the order of ‘we’, rather than of ‘I’ and ‘you’: a common space of norms that we share. In other words, norms are *radically* intersubjective since they are both constituted through the ways in which we interact, and are irreducible to an agent’s norms prior to those interactions.

Importantly, we need to avoid the problem of subsuming individual practices under communal norms, as in Habermasian accounts, which exclude divergent practices to avoid the supposedly ‘impenetrable pluralism of apparently ultimate value orientations’ (Habermas, 1975, p. 108). Our account of intersubjective dialogue would then be hampered by a conservative picture of norms in which those that are accepted by a community will usually be considered valid (Scharp, 2003). Habermasian deliberation requires a neutral and impartial form of language, through which it is possible to reason legitimately and without distortion, and which exists prior to our interactions, rather than being extricated in the complexities of the relationships in which we find ourselves.[[2]](#endnote-2) So, one mistake made by the Habermasian approach is to think of agents as entering into collective debate with fully-formed propositional contents and reasons, which are then put to public tribunal. Here, instead, we want to allow that the norms structuring our reasoning together, and through which the meaning of terms is constructed, are always possibly modifiable, and indeed are constantly modified simply by the practice of engaging in the space of reasons. Brandom’s account helps us to understand the ways in which norms are sedimented and instituted in our interactions, since these are not defined by constitutive rules (that is, rules by which we may be judged not to be reasoning at all unless we adhere to them).[[3]](#endnote-3) Rather, on this view of the way in which we interact with each other, norms are continually constituted and reconstituted *intersubjectively* in the actual practices of our interactions without reducing norms to any particular instantiations, or social regularities, since this leaves us adrift without a critical anchor.

However, Brandom’s Wittgensteinian approach also disbars any influences or spaces that are non-normative from taking a significant role for normativity. Instead, in the context of complex social structures we can foreground the interactional nature of dialogue and the institution of norms as consisting of primarily *sub-intentional* processes, involving embodied actions, feelings, and habits in the coordination and socialisation of our dispositions. Taking our cue from interactional linguistics (Gregoromichelaki et al., 2013a), linguistic interaction may be understood in terms of non-intentional coordination, where communication does not require the manipulation of propositional intentions, and is often sub-personal, involving mechanisms by which agents ‘synchronise’ together prior to the level of communicative intention (Gallagher and Miyahara, 2012). In making utterances in interaction, we may ‘start off without fixed intentions, contribute without completing any fixed propositional content, and rely on others to complete the initiated structure, and so on’ (Gregoromichelaki and Kempson, 2013, p. 80).

So, in distinction to Brandom, the general idea is that interactions give rise to norms when the relevant interactional activities reinforce certain patterns of behaviour as acceptable, or unacceptable. This process of reinforcing in social practices works by recursively acting upon those underlying patterns of behavior, which are often *sub-intentional*. In other words, norms are just the regularities produced by adjustment and correcting mechanisms of feedback both internally to interactions, and externally to material resources and institutional formations. This leads to the reinforcing of stabilities in those interactions through recursive feedback loops generated through the interactions between patterns of behavior. As such, norms are produced by the same sort of mechanisms that generate patterns of behaviour, whilst not being reducible to those mechanisms.

Our normative vocabulary then serves to further modify and reinforce our attitudes and activities in the context of those interactions, so making possible their coordinated activity. Norms, therefore, become sedimented through our interactions, and the cases in which explicit normative talk is required to keep our interactions coherent with each other are decreased over time by the convergence of our practices.[[4]](#endnote-4) As Kiesselbach puts it, this gives us a way of understanding ‘normative talk as essentially calibrational’ (2012, p. 123). It is through the interaction of our practical attitudes in continuous feedback and adjustment that normative assessments become instituted and implicated within those interactions. Our linguistic dispositions (and broader embodied practices), therefore signal and shape the appropriateness of each other’s responses, and so our talk *about* meaning, or *about* the norms shaping our interaction, may also be understood to exhibit dispositions that become implicated in the feedback mechanism insofar as it affects those meanings or norms. Since our own attitudes interact with other practical attitudes, and are made in the context of feedback loops, they are perspectival whilst also being part of the process by which a shared perspectivality is constituted through our interactions.

On this view, intersubjective norms become sedimented in a relational field that is sculpted by overlapping social institutions and structures. As I say, feedback and adjustment institutes and sediments norms across intersecting practices and interactions without clear-cut boundaries. As such, we can understand the practices of interaction to give rise to norms, neither through a process of rational explicitation, nor by communal agreement, but often through the conglomerate pressure of a wider communal practice against the potential validation of divergent practices.

## 3.3. Relative stability

Importantly, the above account of norms and their sedimentation does not presuppose a sharply defined community, but rather considers social structures in terms of their *stratification*. Since structures are causal, but not in a deterministic sense, they construct tendencies depending upon their configuration, and how they operate to systemise practices (Joseph, 2000, p. 188). Stratification gives us a way of accounting for points of stability in processes, where lower-level interactions and processes give rise to systems and structures that have causal power in and of themselves (Elder-Vass, 2010, pp. 58 - 60). Communal norms, for example, clearly exert significant behavioural pressure upon agents’ activities, as well as the relationships that we have together. So, commonsense practices, which emerge from a group’s interactions, and the way in which they are given structure and institutionalised, serve to reinforce specific norms and social practices. These norms are both constituted by our practices, whilst acting on those practices in feedback loops, so becoming entrenched and stratified, particularly where they are institutionalised (Nyroos, 2012). Think of the way in which there exist a set of, largely implicit, norms underlying our talk and practices at local meetings of a political party, and the multiple ways in which our activities are sanctioned and ‘brought back in line’. These may be institutionally enforced in certain cases, but they are more often shaped and reshaped by existing talk, dispositions, and interactional cues. These dispositions, are, moreover, ‘looped-in’ to material processes and social structures and institutions (Hacking, 1999), so further embedding this field of power, stabilising norms, and making certain claims and reasons more difficult to accept or deny. As such, we have a means to understand the *internalisation* of power in norms of reason, without also reducing those norms to social patterns.

This process can be understood as giving rise to forms of *relative stability*. That is, a stability of our interactions and norms that is not fixed nor requires consensus, whilst constraining our reasoning, activities, commitments, and political organisation. Importantly, stability plays a double-edged role. On the one hand, some form of relative stability is required for any kind of meaningful activity, so may be thought of as *generatively* constraining the normative endeavors of groups in that it forms a platform for further political activity and consolidation. On the other hand, the role of power in constituting stability helps to clarify why local contexts and norms often take on the appearance of setting the horizon of political activity, norms, and reasons. So, whilst stability shapes and limits political possibilities, non-static normative stability is also required for any kind of social meaning, positioning, and communal understanding at all.

The account given here thus sheds light on the mechanisms through which the Habermasian and Mouffean approaches tend towards the status quo, whilst also providing an account of the ways in which norms can be analysed and revised in the context of structural power. For example, the sorts of feedback mechanisms that give rise to stability will never be *purely* homeostatic. They are never fully locked-down or closed due to the ways in which our social structures interact and intersect. As such, even stratified structures require ongoing reinforcement, manipulation, and intervention.[[5]](#endnote-5) So, by considering these sorts of pressures, both normative and material, we can explain both the tendency towards stability in social strata, and also the ways in which a specific set of current norms takes on the appearance of fixity. Equally, the propensity towards the status quo cannot be understood simply as the effect of existent structures of power. This would leave no room for the causal efficacy and complexity of social and material infrastructures, nor their ongoing normative revision. Rather, to shore up power requires continual management, sanctioning, and complex reinforcement to maintain the alignment and smoothness of the ways in which social structures function. So, for example, it seems correct that the Habermasian approach entrenches a local set of norms as a horizon for a global political discourse. But, this must also be understood against the backdrop of a set of material, social, and economic generative constraints, where they, and the norms themselves, require complex and multileveled work and mutation to maintain power.

# 4. Transforming the social

We now have at our disposal a much fuller picture of structural implication, which explains how norms are irreducible to structural power, whilst also multiply shaped by it. Those norms, as well as our interactions more generally, are always already forged in complex systems of power. The effects of these social processes are, in general, the constraining, guiding, and shaping of possible actions of agents, not through a system of causal determination, but through the molding of the landscape, or social practices, in which we are all situated. For, it is in these relationships, and through these background norms, that our social positions are given shape, and continually reshaped. In this section, I show how this approach illuminates lacunae in similar approaches, particularly regarding the way in which structural power disenables us from often seeing structural imbalances of power, and clarifies the ways in which reasoning is involved in collective political transformation.

## 4.1. Beyond reasoning towards recognition

The above approach shares some similarities to recent social, recognition-based, approaches to political reasoning (Laden, 2001; Owen and Tully, 2007; Tully, 2008). For example, those, and the above, account, take norms of reasoning to be constituted and reconstituted *intersubjectively* in the actual practices of our interactions. As such, reasons are understood to be constructed over the course of linguistic interactions through coordinated relationships between agents involved in that interaction. The emphasis is on the *collective construction* of ‘joint-reasons’ (Laden, 2012), rather than the assessment and comparison of claims made by single agents. All reasons are the result of a process of joint articulation that is not reducible to, or derivable from, facts about individuals. It is also in the process of reasoning together that we can reconstruct the norms that sculpt the landscape of our interactions (Tully 2008, 144). So, we may think that the shared construction of a space of reasons is coextensive with the constitution of a social *identity* through which we collectively construct and reshape norms for the testing and arbitration of our claims.

However, this is only half of the story, in which reasoning and norms are not merely irreducible to structural power, but ultimately float-free from it. For example, that view takes social cooperation to depend upon a fair exchange of reasons concerning intersubjective norms that structure our interactions. So, in the context of dialogue we come to understand and construct norms of governance and recognition, requiring free and open discussion that is inclusive of all those involved (Laden, 2001, pp. 194 - 99):

A fair exchange of reasons will determine which identities are reasonable, and so worthy of recognition, and which are unreasonable and so either prohibited or at least not publicly supportable. (Tully, 2008, p. 178)

The approach is, therefore, corrective to Habermas’ emphasis on consensus, whilst also emphasising the interrelation between our reasoning together, and the shape of our relationships. In addition, these views attempt to deal with structural power, so, for example, it is through the questioning, and attempted revision, of the norms that structure our interactions at large that we can then struggle against any ‘alien identity’ imposed upon us, ‘through processes of subjectification, either assimilating them to the dominant identity or constructing them as marginal and expendable others’ (Tully, 2008, p. 169). As such, we do not have the reduction of politics to power and difference as with Mouffe’s agonism. But, equally problematically, there is a reduction of politics to a prior account of reasonableness and recognition (Wenman, 2013).

Reasonableness, on these accounts, comes close to playing an ethical version of the role played by Habermasian appeals to rationality, and emphasising recognition rather than the reconstruction of structural power is at risk of eliding structural implication altogether (Fraser, 2008). Tully, for example, takes politics to be grounded in a normative commitment to *audi alteram partem*, which privileges a space for intersubjective horizontal relations. But, this is incapable of accounting for their implication in structural power, and the only substantive focus for political change is listening to multiple voices. For example, Tully discusses the *cooperation* between (colonial) settlers and aboriginal people in Canada, lauding founding act of sharing and generosity (1995, pp. 244 - 5). But, emphasising the mutuality of these relationships, seems more than slightly problematic in its elision of domination, and of course, the structural implication of the set of norms in place in those relationships.

Similarly, Laden (Laden, 2012) contrasts the notions of ‘authority of connection’ and ‘authority of command’. The latter, perhaps more traditional form of authority, is a monological exercise that takes place independently of others’ agreement or response (at that time). The former, in contrast, is constructed through responsive and reciprocal interaction, and so appeals to common aspects of our identity may then be formed by allowing those involved to become ‘coauthors with us of the nature of our political relationship’ (Laden, 2001, p. 149). For Laden (2001, pp. 99 - 185), authority of command is problematic because it allows our identities to be determined by a privileged group and imposed upon us, so denying our status as political equals. But, I do not see how adopting a responsive and reciprocal dialogue to constitute an ‘authority of connection’ regarding our identities would adequately deal with the complexities of structural power. For example, it may well be the case that we are not immediately ‘alienated’ by structural injustice, and if the social realm is grounded upon structural oppression and inequality, then the inclusion of oppressed groups under the ideal of free and equal deliberation is not enough to guarantee that we can undo that inequality, which may be strengthened and entrenched even where our identity is recognised (Fraser, 2008). Furthermore, it seems absolutely plausible that a situation may *appear* to be one in which an authority of connection is constructed, whilst it is also the case that the situation produces and reproduces current structural power. The picture of political interaction in terms of differential identity, would therefore seem only to sanction the status quo, operating only to ensure that cultural recognition of existing identities vis-à-vis the identities of other existing groups, and so obscuring any fundamental asymmetry by foregrounding respect for particularity.

To put these points more bluntly, these approaches fail to account for the social and material landscapes in which our norms are articulated and constituted. Indeed, the politics of recognition hangs on there being a means to distinguish between the order of power and the norms of political reason. But, as discussed above, any structure of norms must also be considered in relation to its material and social basis, even whilst it may have emergent features that are not reducible to the former. That is, power is not just inter-subjective, rather it has objective conditions, whilst these are multiply determining. Different structures, practices and generative mechanisms have various causal properties, which combine, determine, overlap, and interact in complex relationships. These are objective conditions, nonetheless, that produce stratifications of agents, institutions, and social structures. As such, these non-normative grounds of normativity embed local and global generative constraints upon the sorts of norms, relationships, and political actions that we can take.

Tully’s account of normative revision, or ‘changing the rules of the game’ (Tully, 2008) however, floats free from the structural contexts within which interactions, norms, and meanings arise, placing undue emphasis on language games as their explanatory basis. As such, that view is left without an ability to explain the ‘rules’ of the game, agents’ adherence to them, or their revision. Rather, adequate analysis of these requires understanding their situation in social and material practices. It is here that the issues identified by structural implication come to the fore, since in these practices, divergences on behalf of a speaker are typically subject to *sanctions* on that behavior, which attempt to impose a specific set of norms on that speaker (Brandom, 1994). Indeed, we very often experience sanctioning practices, and often these are attributed to conventions and their related censure. But, on the above approach, we cannot look beyond our relationships to a set of standards for such sanctioning practices, and, in so doing, absolve ourselves of responsibility for the institution and reinforcing of those standards. Whether our practice in the context of an interaction is appropriate is a matter of the way in which our practice interacts with others involved. So, the assessment of the appropriateness of our practice through feedback mechanisms becomes also a part of that practice that alters the interaction itself. Thus, the harmonious and *reasonable* nature of much linguistic interaction may be understood to be an effect of the sedimentation of norms through the sanctioning of linguistic practice, and, therefore, of the embedding of specific forms of structural power.

In common parlance, we may think of this embedding of power in social and institutional structures (however much these require continual reinforcement), and the resultant sedimentation of norms as constructing forms of ‘commonsense’ (Collins, 2002, p. 284). If we take ‘commonsense’ to be just the background structure of norms discussed above, it becomes clear how this has substantial material causes *and* ramifications:

Whether the inner-city public schools that many Black girls attend, the low-paid jobs in the rapidly growing service sector that young Black women are increasingly forced to take, the culture of the social welfare bureaucracy that makes Black mothers and children wait for hours, or the mammified work assigned to Black women professionals, the goal is the same-creating quiet, orderly, docile, and disciplined populations of Black women. (Collins, 2002, p. 281)

The picture of structural implication developed above helps us to understand the ways in which these structures of commonsense often disenable the transformation of norms, due to the constructive power that shapes our ‘ideas, images, symbols, and ideologies’ (Collins, 2002, p. 285). In precisely the activities often *supposed* to bring with them the possibility for free and equal dialogue, some agents (if not all) find themselves to be embedded in, *and to further embed*, the forms of power that disenable them from exactly that.

## 4.2. Transforming structural power

Our discussion began with criticisms of universal reason in liberal political philosophy, which, understood through the lens of difference, force upon us an account of power as a mechanism of exclusion from a universal that is imposed from without. By emphasising, and developing, the idea of structural implication in the context of complex social systems, I sketched a more sophisticated account of the relationship between reason and power that shifts us beyond issues of difference, by showing how norms of reason internalise power without being reducible to it. This gives us tools to analyse the stratification of social norms, and to transform the landscapes of power in which we are situated.

My point in the above is not that we should jettison altogether the insights of Tully or Mouffe’s agonistic approach to the political. Rather, it is that these insights are not achievable given the tools at their disposal. So, for example, Tully’s Wittgensteinian approach cannot get off the ground without an ability to explain the ‘rules’ of the game, agents’ adherence to them, or their revision, and Mouffe’s agonistic approach cannot get off the ground without an ability to explain the norms of reason and their extra-discursive sculpting. But also, in the process of articulating a structure for political reasoning and its imbrication with power by *internalising* power in norms of reason, the ambitions and objects of critique of these approaches are not left unchanged.

Reason and power are brought together here, not as imposition of power over the “other” that can be reasonably transformed (Tully), nor as an abstracted universal that excludes difference (Mouffe). Rather, norms of reason internalise power through sanctions and attunement to constrain and guide the possible actions of agents by shaping the landscape in which we are situated. The *political* construction of arrangements of bodies and norms has never operated as a process of rational imposition. Structural injustices and asymmetries of power cannot, therefore, be solved through a ‘fair exchange of reasons’ to prevent an ‘alien identity’ from being imposed upon us (Tully, 2008, p. 169), nor by articulating a ‘successful power’ divested of both objective power relations and reason (Mouffe, 2000).

Let us consider, on the approach developed above, the ways in which reasoning is involved in the revision of normative systems through the very activities that instantiate those systems. By emphasising the ways in which our social practices and structures are not ‘locked-down’ even in the context of functional stabilities, we can consider how social reasoning operates to give rise to new capacities, and new normative systems. The ways in which our norms interact with each other, and may be revised through those interactions, therefore, may bring about changes and new patterns of activity, which drive normative systems along new trajectories. And, moreover, this may happen even where those systems are relatively stable and institutionalised. As such, systems of norms are never static, requiring constant reinforcing and reforging, and so there are dynamic tendencies for their modification in every situation, however sealed-off these may appear. For example, whilst the Habermasian approach to reasoning emphasises consensus and Brandom’s upon equilibrium, the resultant entrenching of a local set of norms as horizon for a global political discourse is always the result of complex *processes* producing a relative stability through mostly harmonious interaction and conglomerate pressures. So, in the context of relative stability, our interactions typically go on fairly smoothly, and may be understood in terms of the shared norms underlying the collaborative actions that structure our interchanges. As described above, such coordination is often sub-personal, involving mechanisms by which agents ‘synchronise’ prior to the level of communicative intention (Gregoromichelaki et al., 2013a). But, no structure of norms, nor the systems of power in which they are embedded, is determined. Our local contexts, behaviours, and perspectives are never fixed, and the ways in which they are always interwoven with other local context, and implicated in global structures, means that their normative, and material, transformation is always possible.

Explicit reasoning about these norms occurs where there is disagreement, or divergence, such that these interactions no longer go on as anticipated. Indeed, we employ normative statements as part of a mechanism to repair conversations, or to sanction certain practices, which become implicated in feedback mechanisms to further embed those norms in our practical attitudes. If the processes and mechanisms of coordination and feedback go on smoothly, such normative language is not required to keep the interaction going. The use of normative vocabulary typically comes into play when agents are required to conceptualise interactional performances, or to repair conversations (Gregoromichelaki et al., 2013b). Reasoning, here, involves the recognition of the correctness or incorrectness of other’s statements, with normative statements actualising those agents’ dispositions and practical attitudes through such recognition. As such, reasons are emergent from interactions as ‘discursive constructs’ (Gregoromichelaki et al., 2013b), which allow for explicit deliberation, particularly when the coordination of underlying dialogue breaks down. Our interactions are the foundation through which reasons come to be constructed *a posteriori*, since we cannot determine in advance of the interaction, either what counts as a reason, or the meaning of expressions involved. This is a process of *construction* in the sense that it requires us to clarify, and to give structure to, practices that are under-determined from our non-rationalised practices. So, it is not the case that normative statements ‘make explicit’ implicit norms that an agent adheres to, since our interactions cut-across several social settings and material structures, which surpass the knowledge of individual or even communal agents. Instead, our reasoning practices may be better understood in terms of the navigation of interactions in attempt to actualise and alter our dispositions by shifting pressure to act along certain trajectories.

In considering our practices in relation to others through unexpected response, or the breakdown of communication, it becomes possible to reconsider and to reconstruct social norms, and begin to build new forms of relative stability. This further problematises the demand for reasonableness in Tully’s work. Whether our utterances are *considered* reasonable is a downstream effect of the normative sculpting of our social spaces. By grounding reasoning in action co-ordination and the recursive action of norms upon it, we can understand how acting *reasonably* according to accepted norms of the communities in which we live reinforces processes that contribute to the existing landscape of power. So, it is precisely in these moments of problematic interruption to harmonious interaction that it becomes possible to orient ourselves towards the contingency of our local meanings, so making visible our latent parochialisms and ‘reasonable’ biases (Ahmed, 2010). In many cases, then, people may claim that certain interactions are *unreasonable*, whilst those interactions are directed at shifting structural norms such that social positions and actions may be transformed to attend to structural imbalances of power. These supposedly unreasonable processes will be subject to sanctions determining whether we adequately ‘fall into step’ with other members of our community. But, what this means in practice, is that by actively renegotiating these sanctions, and so modifying the norms of our interactions, it is possible to reform the landscape of power. We may consider these to always offer new possibilities for the normative construction of the social landscape, for the meanings of our terms and the claims that we accept, our collective interests and desires. Reasoning together, then, would involve the often-costly activities of building new social forms that, whilst intersecting with others, are capable of the active reconstruction of our attitudes towards new normative fields of activity. To build this kind of collective, and transformative reason, we will need to nurture these supposedly unreasonable activities involved in fundamentally reshaping the exclusionary structures and frameworks through which we understand the world. The response to structural injustices, therefore involves collective forms of reasoning that are actively directed towards knitting together a direction of travel against the grain of power, not through inclusion in an impoverished sham universal, nor for expressions of a reason that is supposedly authentic to our identities, but by calling into being new norms of reason *from below*.

Clearly, whilst attempting to shift structural power, these practices could not be *immune* from power. As discussed above, the complexities of structural implication produce differentials that shape the possible ways in which practices may be exercised. These forms of political transformation concern the pragmatic attempt to engender collective capacities to act to redress current objective inequalities, asymmetries of power, and structural injustices. This requires us also to pay attention to the strategic reconstruction of our institutions and material processes to better scaffold and stabilise new norms, and practices, across our interactions. That is to say, any organisation and re-organisation of social structures requires inter and intra-strata negotiation, consolidation, and restructuring. We also need to recognise that these are never automatically reproduced precisely because of their being ‘complexly structured with diverse mechanisms, practices and human activities’ (Joseph, 2000, p. 185). The construction of a common transformative project, therefore, requires us to consider the ways in which these situations are already structured, along the lines of a landscape distributed with dispositions, habits, resources, limitations, and so our capacity to transform that landscape will also depend upon our position within it. But, in the process, social and political actions may form relative stabilities around new systems of norms, interests, and dispositions, which become embedded by looping-in to institutions and material resources. So, these practices take place within the context of a collective formation that already exists, whilst also calling into being new collective formations, and new ‘worlds’ of political possibility.

**Acknowledgements**

Versions of this article were presented at the Dutch Arts Institute, the University of York, and London Conference in Critical Thought. I thank participants at these events for their helpful comments, as well as to Tom Trevatt and the reviewers for their incisive suggestions on previous drafts.

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1. I use implication rather than Young’s ‘structural responsibility’ to sidestep issues regarding causal responsibility, liability, and so on. See (Fischer, 2012; Healy, 2011; Simpson, 2001; Talisse, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. As Wittgenstein points out, not only are such ideal projects impossible, they are also undesirable attempts to abjure us from taking responsibility for our claims, and to reduce ongoing conversations to rational argumentation (Zerilli, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The below account differs from Brandom most importantly in terms of commitment to the intersubjective constitution of norms, which, in (Trafford, 2017) I argue is not possible on Brandom’s approach (see also (Kiesselbach, 2012)). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This is consistent with linguistic research showing how:

   […] speakers can start an utterance without a fully formed intention / plan as to how it will develop relying on feedback from the hearer to shape their utterance and its construal and this provides the basis for the joint derivation of structures, meaning and action in dialogue. (Gregoromichelaki and Kempson, 2013, p. 192) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Consider, for example, the massive-scale interventions in the ongoing mutations of neoliberalism (as ideology and socio-economic organisational practices), e.g. (Brown, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)