Alasia Nuti (University of York)

[alasia.nuti@york.ac.uk](mailto:alasia.nuti@york.ac.uk)

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**On Structural Injustice, Reconciliation and Alienation**

In *Justice and Reconciliation in World Politics*, Lu argues that justice and reconciliation are analytically distinct but both needed after political catastrophes like colonialism. I argue that Lu’s compelling reconceptualization of reconciliation precisely shows the contrary by making the project of reconciliation indistinguishable from the task of realising structural justice and that we should reject the language of reconciliation in some contexts. Moreover, I contend that, in an important sense, alienation (i.e., the wrong that, according to Lu, reconciliation aims to tackle) must be generated to move towards a structurally just world. Indeed, the project of creating a structurally unjust order does require the alienation of agents from the existing background conditions of their actions.

Catherine Lu’s *Justice and Reconciliation in World Politics* makes many important contributions to several debates in political theory and international relations. For instance, Lu does a brilliant job at showing that not only actual responses to political catastrophes, such as wars, imperialism and settler colonialism, but also existing theorizing about global (in)justice hinge upon statist biases that have undermined the possibility of constructing a just world. I agree with many arguments that Lu skilfully advances in her work and, in particular, I share her view that we need to focus on the complexity of unjust structures if we aim to understand the nature and workings of many contemporary domestic, international and trasnational injustices.[[1]](#footnote-1) Due to our shared concerns and intellectual affinities, my comment is meant to be a friendly conversation about some aspects of Lu’s book that – I think – need to be clarified, rather than a criticism of its important core.

In what follows, I will concentrate on the notions of reconciliation and alienation that are at the centre of Lu’s account and, more specifically, on their relation to justice. For Lu, reconciliation is achieved when a mutually affirmable and affirmed social and political order that can support the flourishing of nonalienated agents is established. According to Lu, although related, ‘Justice and reconciliation are analytically distinct concepts and cannot be reduced to one another’ and, thus, both are needed to redress political catastrophes like colonialism (Lu 2017: 18). Section 1 takes issue with this claim. In particular, I will argue that once reconciliation is re-conceptualised in the way that Lu compellingly proposes, it loses its distinctiveness as a moral and political category and it becomes indistinguishable from a specific type of justice, which, according to Lu, we should pursue, i.e., structural justice. The fact that ‘reconciliation’ is redundant may be for the best: indeed, in some contexts, we have important political reasons to eschew the very language of reconciliation. Section 2 contends that the notion of structural injustice casts lights on whether alienation – which is the wrong that Lu’s account of reconciliation aims to identify and address – is necessarily a wrong. Indeed, in important yet too often neglected ways, generating alienation (even of those suffering from structural injustice) is crucial in the process of moving towards structural justice. Therefore, whether alienation is wrong or not depends on whether it advances the task of constructing a structurally just order.

**1. Reconciliation as Structural Justice**

Transitional justice scholars have stressed that reconciliation and justice can often conflict as values especially when justice is conceived mainly in retributive terms. Like others (e.g., Allais 2012), Lu rejects the prioritization of one value over the other but she also interestingly maintains that justice and reconciliation should not be conflated – both are necessary yet different goals in the context of political catastrophes. In particular, for Lu, reconciliation responds to the alienation that agents may experience after a political catastrophe (Lu 2017: 18). One of the most innovative features of Lu’s account of reconciliation is the notion of ‘structural reconciliation’, which refers to the reconciliation of agents with ‘social and political institutions and practices’ from which they are alienated (Lu 2017: 190). According to Lu, structural reconciliation should take normative priority over the reconciliations of agents with one another (‘interactional reconciliation’) and, failure to achieve it can have very pernicious effects as those who cannot affirm the institutional and structural order that they inhabit may also become disconnected to themselves and their communities, that is, they may become self-alienated (Lu 2017: 203). By introducing the powerful notion of structural reconciliation, Lu turns reconciliation into a political task and, thus, overcomes many flaws of mainstream accounts of reconciliation, which tend to push victims to make peace with wrongs and injustices committed to them and unrealistically eliminate any source of disagreement and tension from societies and the international order.

However, when reconciliation is so compellingly reconceived, it becomes difficult to understand what makes it a distinctive political project and, specifically, how it differs from the aim of achieving justice. This is because Lu also rightly departs from the narrow focus on retributive justice and understands justice also in distributive and structural terms. But, addressing structural injustice – at least in the interpretation offered by Iris Marion Young that Lu endorses – already entails constructing a structurally reconciled social and political order.

According to Young, structural 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 2011: 52). Thinking about (in)justice in structural terms entails a specific ‘way of looking’ at society and our international order, which does not only look at a ‘small set of institutions’ (e.g., in Rawlsian terms ‘a basic structure’) but, instead, zooms out to include processes that are usually deemed to be outside the remits of justice such as processes of ‘normalisation’ that elevate ‘the experience and capacities of some social segments into standards used to judge everyone’ (Young 2006: 95). However, this does not mean that changes in our institutional background (that is, our institutional order) are not also fundamental component of tackling structural injustices. For instance, tackling the structural injustice of LGBTQ+ persons, including the normalisation of heteronormative relations, should arguably require a deep transformation (or even the eradication) of major institutions (e.g., marriage and the family) that regulate our societies in a way that cannot be affirmed by those who do not conform to heteronormative expectations (e.g., Calhoun 2000). According to Young, structural injustice may occur even when individual and collective agents simply follow accepted rules and practices but this does not mean that such rules and practices should not be scrutinised (Young 2011: 100); conversely, the notion of structural injustice precisely aims to scrutinise and potentially challenge *all* those background conditions in which agents exercise their agency.

In many important respects, Young’s notion of ‘structural injustice’ should be read in continuity with Young’s previous work on oppression and domination. In *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Young famously argues that agents are dominated when others can ‘determine *without reciprocation* the conditions of their actions’ and they are oppressed when ‘systematic institutional [and structural] processes’ seriously hinders their capacities of self-development (Young 1990: 38, my emphasis). Famously, for Young, oppression has many faces, including powerlessness and cultural imperialism (Young 1990: 48-63). The condition of indigenous peoples in settler colonial societies like Canada – which is one of the main cases that Lu’s account of reconciliation focuses on – can arguably be described as one of structural injustice. More specifically, indigenous peoples are both dominated and oppressed as their self-determination is continuously violated in contexts like settler societies where indigenous peoples do not have control over the background conditions in which ‘they decide on their own goals and interpret their way of life’ (Young 2007: 50). As Young points out, addressing the persisting injustice against indigenous peoples, which is a legacy of colonialism, entails both ‘interpretative and institutional’ measures (Young 2007: 15). Institutionally, for instance, we should challenge the ‘existing international system of nation-states’ (Young 2007: 15-16), which is one of the most taken-for-granted background conditions in which we exercise our agency. Interpretatively, we should decolonise our knowledge (including those institutional channels producing it, such as universities) and the very discourses and narratives about ‘modernity, democracy and the building of nation-states’ that play such a crucial role in constructing our relational identities (Young 2007:16). It is important to observe that how exactly the structural injustice suffered by indigenous peoples should be addressed would vary from one context to another and would depend on the specific claims made by indigenous communities. The framework of structural injustice does not provide a blueprint for action that can be universally applied but recognises that establishing authentically non-dominating and non-oppressive relations necessarily entails respecting the different ways in which those suffering from structural injustice may envisage their self-determination and self-development.

In sum, Lu’s initial claim that, although related, justice and reconciliation after political catastrophes like settler colonialism cannot be reduced to one another is tenable only if projects of reconciliation deliver goals that justice-based accounts of, say, settler-colonialism are unable to provide. This may be the case when both justice and reconciliation are *not* conceived in structural terms; however, when reconciliation is framed in the way proposed by Lu, it becomes difficult to recognise its distinctiveness. To ‘save’ the project of reconciliation from charges of depoliticisation and over-demandingness, Lu’s account ends up with turning reconciliation into justice. What seems to differentiate Lu’s account from alternative proposals to rethink reconciliation in justice-based terms is not that the former maintains the specificity of both notions but that the latter tend to operate with a remarkably different and less encompassing understanding of justice, i.e., one reducing justice to punishing wrongdoers and restoring right relations (e.g., Philpott 2012).

We should eschew the language of reconciliation not only for conceptual clarity and parsimony. Indeed, in *specific* contexts not using the language of reconciliation becomes of paramount political importance. In some (although obviously not all) contexts characterised by past and persisting violence and inequality, the discourse of reconciliation has been instrumentalised by those in power and used as a vehicle of further oppression. According to some indigenous scholars and activists like Taiaiake Alfred and Glen Couthard, for example, in Canada over the last decades, reconciliation (and recognition) emerged as the ‘new paradigm […] to govern Canada’s “Aboriginal Affairs”’ (Couthard and Epstein 2015). This is exemplified by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2008-2015), which attempted to document the harms and impact of residential schools, address its legacy and reconcile Indigenous peoples with the Canadian state but arguably ended up with further reproducing settler colonial relations (Couthard and Epstein 2015). The discourse of reconciliation can be particularly well-suited for the oppressor to reveal ‘their compassionate face’ (Alfred 1999: 16) precisely because it has so often asked victims of injustice to put aside their resentment and justice-claims in order to build a ‘united’ society while reproducing and reinforcing power-asymmetries. In contexts where reconciliation has historically been or has more recently become ‘the language of the oppressor’, keeping deploying the frame of reconciliation (even after having substantially reformulated its content) may prove to be further alienating, especially for those who have been prevented from living in an institutional and structural order that they could affirm. To be sure, these considerations do not want to provide a knockdown political argument against using the language of reconciliation. However, they want to warn that, in *some* contexts, such a frame may actually backfire on the very project of building an institutional and structural order that can nourish non-alienated agents after (some) political catastrophes. Arguably many concepts that we currently use (e.g., equality, freedom, and justice) have been deployed as a tool of oppression and domination but this does not mean that some of them should not be seen as *particularly* problematic when invoked in some contexts to promote emancipatory goals. To wit, if we aim to enable the structural and existential alienation of those historically oppressed, we also need to endorse a context-sensitive approach to the very language we deploy to frame such an important yet already very challenging goal.

**2. Structural Injustice and (the lack of) alienation**.

We tend to think of alienation as something intrinsically problematic, which must be avoided or addressed. Lu’s account of alienation seems to confirm our intuition about the wrongness of alienated agents. According to Lu, alienation ‘refers to the experiences of disconnection, disruption and distortion’ in the relations that they have with themselves, with other agents and with the world (Lu 2017: 188). When agents are alienated they do not feel at home in the world and they may lack the ‘capacity to identify with oneself and with what one does’ (Jaeggi 2014: 37 quoted in Lu 2017: 188).

Be that as it may, the relation between, on the one hand, the project of achieving structural justice and, on the one hand, the *desideratum* of creating agents that are not subjectively alienated is more complex than it may appear. Lu mentions that trying to decolonizing domestic and international structures is ‘likely to generate alienation […] of those whose social positions were predicated on colonial structures of identities, norms, and rules of privilege’ (Lu 2017: 212). However, the problem is not simply that the process of tackling colonial structural injustice (and structural injustice more in general) *can* cause alienation but that it *must* do so. As Young points out, ‘When we judge that structural injustice exists, we are saying precisely that at least some of the *normal* and *accepted* background conditions of action are not morally acceptable’ (Young 2011: 102; my emphasis). One of the main challenges in revealing and fighting against structural injustice is showing that many of the structural features of our societies and world that agents regard as natural, fail to scrutinise and do not perceive as problematic need to be radically changed or dismantled. Structural injustice endures over time also because many agents do feel at home in the world that they inhabit.

In her account of the daily struggles of feminist activists in killing the joy of those who do not want to recognise or think about sexism, Sara Ahmed perfectly captures the ‘disruption’ that is created by those who, instead, strenuously attempt to denounce the structural injustices that are present in our societies and world. By trying to shatter the illusion that societies are not regulated through unequal gendered and sexed norms or that an unequal gendered and sexed order is morally unproblematic, feminist activists are perceived as creating disorder and obstructing others’ peaceful coexistence with the world they live in. As Ahmed compellingly puts it, ‘To be willing to go against a social order, which is protected as a moral order, a happiness order is to be willing to cause unhappiness’ (Ahmed 2010). Not only does being a feminist often constitute ‘an alienation from [one’s own] happiness’ but also it entails being willing to disorient and alienate others from what they are at ease and identify with. Importantly, those who occupy a position of privilege within unjust structures are not the only ones who tend to be disalienated from the unjust order they live in. Sometimes even those suffering from structural injustice do not perceive their condition as unjust and may vehemently resist to attempts to prove them the contrary. For instance, as bell hooks observes in the case of gendered oppression, women themselves often ‘act in complicity with the status quo’ and take the status quo as how societies *should* be organised (hooks 2014: 43).

In this respect, from within a structural injustice framework subjective alienation – i.e., agents’ actual feeling of being disoriented and disconnected – is not just a possible by-product of the struggle to achieve structural justice but it must be caused in order to start off the process of eradicating unjust structures. It is lack of *subjective* alienation what very often does undermine the type of collective action that is necessary to fight against and eventually overcome structural injustice. Thinking about alienation in the context of structural injustices leads us to endorse a more ambivalent view on the wrong of alienation than Lu recognises. Whether alienation is wrong or not depends on whether it advances or undermines the difficult and often painful road towards creating a structurally just domestic and international order. Theorising the lack of alienation in our structurally unjust world is not only conceptually and normatively important. In times when the backlash against those who disturb the comfort that many derive from the status quo is as strong and worrying as ever, it is also politically crucial to support the disruptive labour that many activists do daily and remind them that the alienation that they cause is essential to build the world that, like many of us, Lu aims for: a world from which nobody is objectively alienated.

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**Note on contributor**:

Alasia Nuti is Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in Political Theory at the University of York. Her monograph entitled *Injustice and the Reproduction of History: Structural Inequalities, Gender and Redress* has been just published with Cambridge University Press. Her work has been published in journals including *The Journal of Political Theory*, *Political Theory*, *Feminist Theory* and *Ethics & Internationally Affairs*.

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1. However, as I argued elsewhere, I think that a structural approach to injustices (and especially to unjust history) (i) should take reparations for wrongs committed in the distant past more seriously and (ii) complicates issues of political responsibility for such injustices even further than Lu’s account acknowledges (see Nuti 2019, Chapters 8 and 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)