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The Invisible Social Class: Relational Equality and Extreme Social Exclusion

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Abstract

In this article, I develop a novel relational egalitarian theory of social exclusion that explains how society fails to treat socially excluded individuals – such as people experiencing homelessness, individuals with substance use disorders and mental illness and sex workers – as equals. I argue that society places and keeps excluded individuals at the very bottom of the social status hierarchy by treating them as *socially* invisible, or by rendering them *physically* invisible, or both. The upshot, then, is that part of what is wrong with social exclusion is that it creates the *invisible social class*.

Keywords

homelessness, hostile architecture, invisibility, relational equality, social exclusion, social status hierarchy

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> The poor man . . . is ashamed of his poverty. He feels that it either places him out of the sight of mankind, or, that if they take any notice of him, they have, however, scarce any fellow-feeling with the misery and distress which he suffers.
>
> —Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

Introduction

An area of approximately 50 city blocks in east downtown Los Angeles is home to people experiencing homelessness, individuals with substance use disorders, people with severe mental health illness, illegal immigrants, sex workers and drug dealers, who live excluded from the rest of society. This area is known as 'Skid Row', the capital of United States homelessness, which hosts more than 4,400 homeless people, making up 10% of LA's downtown population (Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), 2022). Most

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major cities in North America have their own Skid Rows, metropolitan neighbourhoods characterised by extreme poverty, streets full of tents, open-air drug use and other kinds of illegal activities, smell of faeces, urine and heaps of trash.[1] And, although they are not known as 'Skid Rows', major cities all over the world have deprived areas marked by multiple forms of disadvantage where people are socially excluded – from the 'Crackland' in Sao Paolo, Brazil (Cowie, 2017), to the sewer tunnels in Bucharest, Romania (Calvarino, 2015), to the Kibera slums in Nairobi, Kenya (Jacobs and Ritchel, 2019).

Social exclusion is, therefore, a pervasive and troubling phenomenon that affects society's most vulnerable members. The aim of this article is to advance the debate on this issue by developing a novel relational egalitarian theory of social exclusion that explains the wrongness of the social condition of those individuals (or groups) who live in contexts of *extreme social exclusion*, that is, individuals (or groups) who are significantly disadvantaged due to the scarcity of material and social resources available to them.[2]

Applying the relational egalitarian framework to the issue of social exclusion is important for two reasons, at least. First, the wrong of social exclusion is typically explained by reference to the significant goods that marginalised individuals lack, such as the opportunity to establish meaningful social relationships and participate fully in society. However, drawing on the relational egalitarian literature, I argue that this distributive framework cannot account for the intrinsic moral importance of how society fails to treat socially excluded individuals as equals. I show that exploring the diversity of the normative reasons for objecting to social exclusion is crucial to understanding the causal role of institutional actions in creating and perpetuating the social exclusion of vulnerable individuals, and the expressive dimension of exclusionary policies and practices.

Second, this analysis contributes to the development of relational egalitarianism by examining a kind of oppressive and unequal relation that has so far been under-theorised by relational egalitarians. Indeed, while much attention has been given to other objectionable social relations – such as discrimination (Eidelson, 2015; Hellman, 2008; Moreau, 2020), domination (Kolodny, 2023: chapter 23; Schemmel, 2021: chapters 3–4) and paternalism (Anderson, 1999; Hojlund, 2021) – less has been said about the wrong of social exclusion and what is owed to those vulnerable individuals who live on the very hard margins of society.[3] This article fills this lacuna in the relational egalitarian literature by explaining how social exclusion is a distinctive kind of relational inequality, which is morally wrong independently of, and in addition to, its role in enabling other forms of objectionable social relations.

The result, then, is a theory of social exclusion that will enrich our understanding of the wrongness of exclusionary social policies and practices and shed novel light on the demands of an inclusive society of equals.

This article is structured as follows. In the section 'The Distributive Wrong(s) of Social Exclusion', I offer an overview of the 'distributive wrongs' of social exclusion by illustrating the valuable goods marginalised individuals are deprived of. In the section 'Relational Equality and the Rejection of Social Status Hierarchy', I develop an account of the meaning and importance of the 'relational wrong' and identify two aspects of this wrong – namely, the causal role of institutional actions in generating and sustaining unjust disadvantage and the expressive dimension of institutional actions – which can neither be explained by nor reduced to its distributive consequences. Building on this, in the next sections, I put forward a 'theory of invisibility' that describes the different ways in which society fails to treat excluded individuals as equals. In the section 'The Relational Wrong of Social Exclusion (1): Social Invisibility', I argue that society treats excluded

individuals as 'socially invisible', thereby conferring upon them the inferior social status of 'things'. In the section 'The Relational Wrong of Social Exclusion (2): Physical Invisibility', I contend that society also renders excluded individuals 'physically invisible', thus ascribing to them the inferior social status of 'persona non grata'. The final section concludes.

If the arguments presented here are correct, vulnerable individuals who live excluded from the rest of society are not only deprived of some valuable goods necessary to live a minimally good life but they are also located and kept at the very bottom of the social status hierarchy by being treated as invisible. The upshot, then, is that part of what is wrong with social exclusion is that it creates an *invisible social class*.

The Distributive Wrong(s) of Social Exclusion

Theorists of social exclusion typically explain the wrong of social exclusion by reference to the valuable goods socially excluded individuals are deprived of. In this picture, social exclusion is morally problematic if and because it results in an unfair distribution of valuable goods, that is, if and because individuals who are socially excluded are denied access to significant goods that others have.[4] Call this, the *distributive wrong(s)* of social exclusion. In this section, I offer a brief overview of the distributive wrong(s) of social exclusion. Only once we have examined why social exclusion is morally objectionable *qua* goods deprivation, will we be in a position to see what significant dimensions of the wrongness of social exclusion, if any, this distributive framework is unable to account for.

In the political philosophy literature, proponents of the capability approach have paid particular attention to the issue of social exclusion. Amartya Sen, for example, holds that the notion of social exclusion is crucial to our understanding of 'poverty'. According to Sen, poverty should be understood not merely as low income, but more generally as 'the lack of the capability to live a minimally decent life' (Sen, 2000: 4). In Sen's view, then, the concept of social exclusion captures the relational dimension of the inability to live a minimally decent life: specifically, social exclusion consists in lacking the capability to interact freely with others and take part in the life of the community (Sen, 2000: 6). In a similar vein, Martha Nussbaum argues that the capability of 'affiliation' is one of the ten capabilities that human beings must have to lead a dignified life. Being excluded from society, therefore, is unjust because it deprives individuals of their ability to engage in various forms of social interaction (Nussbaum, 2006: 77).

Another prominent theorist of the capability approach, Jonathan Wolff, observes that socially excluded individuals are unable – or at least much less able – to 'fit into, or flourish within, mainstream institutions' (Wolff, 2017: 175; see also Barry, 2002: 19–22). They lack equal occupational opportunities, as they are either *de facto* excluded from the labour market, or vulnerable to exploitative, low wages and menial jobs. Moreover, they do not have equal opportunities to participate in politics, as they do not possess sufficient external resources to exercise political influence (e.g. education and money).

Finally, drawing on the capability approach but from a human rights perspective, Kimberley Brownlee argues that social exclusion violates human beings' basic social need to 'have minimally adequate access to decent human contact and connection' (Brownlee, 2020: 1). Not only is the lack of minimally adequate social connections detrimental to human beings' security and well-being, but it also denies them access to the resources necessary to contribute meaningfully to other people's survival and well-being (Brownlee, 2020: 16; see also Young, 1990: 52–55). Therefore, social exclusion is unjust

because it is a social condition where individuals are neither supported by nor able to support others.[5]

Being socially excluded is thus a deprivation in and of itself: it consists of being incapable of establishing and contributing to meaningful social relationships and being unable to fit in and participate in the normal activities of society. But being excluded from society can also lead to other deprivations. First of all, people who live in contexts of extreme social exclusion typically live in conditions of absolute poverty: they do not have the financial resources necessary to satisfy their basic needs, such as adequate access to water, food, housing, and clothes. Second, social exclusion is a crucial determinant of physical and mental health. Research evidence shows that people experiencing homelessness are at greater risk of suffering from a wide range of health problems, such as 'seizures, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, arthritis and other musculoskeletal disorders', 'respiratory tract infections', and 'skin and foot problems' (Hwang, 2001: 230). In addition, socially excluded individuals are much more likely to experience mental health illnesses, including anxiety, depression, substance use disorder, and self-harm or suicidal behaviour (Boardman, 2011; van Bergen et al., 2019). Finally, social exclusion exposes persons to greater risks of violence. In 2019, the American National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) reported that, over the past 20 years, there have been '1,852 incidents of violence against people who were homeless at the hands of people who were not homeless', with women homeless being especially vulnerable to sexual assault (NCH, 2020).[6]

To sum up, social exclusion is an unjust social condition in its own right, as it consists in being deprived of the capability to establish meaningful social relationships and participate fully in society. In addition, it is a significant contributing factor to absolute poverty as well as vulnerability to severe physical and mental health illnesses and violence.

Relational Equality and the Rejection of Social Status Hierarchy

People who live in conditions of extreme social exclusion do not have access to a wide range of valuable goods necessary to lead a minimally good life. This is clearly morally objectionable. Yet, this alone does not capture all the normative reasons for objecting to social exclusion because it is unable to account for the wrongness of how social and political institutions fail to *treat* marginalised individuals as equal members of society. This is the *relational wrong* of social exclusion. Such wrong generates additional complaints on the part of socially excluded individuals that can neither be explained by nor reduced to the distributive wrongs identified in the previous section.[7] Or so I will argue.

Accordingly, in this section, drawing on the relational egalitarian literature, I explain what it means for persons to be treated as inferiors, and why unequal treatment is of intrinsic moral importance in addition to and independently of its distributive effects. Building on this, in the subsequent sections, I analyse the ways in which socially excluded individuals are treated as inferiors, thereby identifying the specific relational wrong(s) of social exclusion.

Relational egalitarians argue that a just society is not primarily characterised by a specific pattern of distribution, whereby individuals have an equal or sufficient amount of some valuable good(s), such as capabilities or resources. Rather, as Elizabeth Anderson puts it, a just society is 'a social order in which persons stand in relations of equality, [. . .] a democratic community, as opposed to a hierarchical one' (Anderson, 1999: 313)[8]. In a

relational egalitarian framework, therefore, what fundamentally matters from a justice standpoint is not the possession of some valuable goods but the avoidance of hierarchies of social status that assign positions of inferiority or superiority to different individuals (Viehoff, 2019: 9). The relevant questions are thus the following: what is a status hierarchy? When and why is a specific form of status hierarchy morally objectionable? I address these questions in turn.

To start with, let us introduce the notion of status:

> **Status.** A status is a 'normative profile' that defines the set of entitlements and obligations that a person (or group) has by virtue of holding that status, and which is conferred to them on the basis of the possession of a salient property (or set of properties)[9].

Persons have a variety of statuses. Here are two examples: being the genetic procreator of a child is typically a sufficient condition for having 'parental status', by virtue of which a person has the authority to make decisions on behalf of their child, and the obligation to satisfy their child's basic needs and care for their well-being. By holding a specific set of competencies and skills, some individuals have the status of 'teacher', in virtue of which they are entitled to demand students' attention and have a professional obligation to foster and support their development.

The possession of a status, in turn, calls for an appropriate response, that is, a fitting or appropriate way to value the bearer of that status. More precisely, to value a person by virtue of their status means displaying the appropriate set of attitudes and behaviours that are owed to that person by virtue of holding that status (Van Wietmarschen, 2022). For instance, a child values their parents if they display a loving attitude and behaviour towards them. A student, instead, does not value appropriately their teacher if they show disrespectful attitudes and behaviours towards them.

Based on this, we can provide the following definition of status hierarchy:

> **Status hierarchy**. A status hierarchy is the stratified ranking of individuals (or groups) (i) along a specific status, (ii) on the basis of the set of attitudes and behaviours deemed the appropriate or fitting response to that specific status.

Thus, an individual's (or group's) position within the status hierarchy is determined by the set of attitudes and behaviours that are owed to them by virtue of their status. Therefore, two individuals (or groups), A and B, are placed in a higher or lower position within the status hierarchy if and when the set of attitudes and behaviours required by A's status and B's status involves valuing A more or less than B.

To illustrate: in contemporary societies, the status of 'professional athlete' commands a higher degree of esteem than the status of 'cleaner'. Professional athletes are influential public figures, praised and admired for their success. They get special treatment and receive large monetary rewards. Cleaners, instead, are regarded as uneducated and unskilled workers. Their job is low paid and they are looked down upon by other members of society. The difference in the array of attitudes and behaviours displayed towards professional athletes and cleaners places the former in a higher position than the latter within the social esteem hierarchy.

Hierarchical relationships, however, are ubiquitous in society. Some forms of status hierarchies are unavoidable and not all forms of status hierarchies are inherently morally objectionable. For example, arguably parents and children do not (always) stand in an

equal relation with one another. Neither do teachers and students. Yet, these hierarchical relations are not necessarily objectionable in and of themselves. This then raises the question of when and why a specific form of status hierarchy is morally objectionable. For our purposes, it is not necessary to provide a fully worked-out account that identifies *all* forms of wrongful status hierarchies.[10] Instead, it will be sufficient to explain why at least some forms of status hierarchies are deeply morally problematic. This will provide the basis for the discussion in the next sections.

Building on the definition of status hierarchy provided above, I argue that a status hierarchy is morally objectionable in and of itself if:

1. It is based on individuals' *social status*, that is, the status that generates the most fundamental entitlements that individuals have simply by virtue of being *equal members of society*. This is the *scope* of the status hierarchy.
2. It presupposes a violation of the principle of basic 'recognition respect', which requires regarding a person as a source of value in and of themselves that ought to be taken into account when deliberating about what morality demands (Darwall, 1977). This is the *content* of the status hierarchy.

This account of the wrongness of status hierarchy offers a coherent and plausible way to distinguish forms of status hierarchy that are deeply objectionable from those that are not – or at least that are less so. To appreciate this, consider a paradigmatic form of objectionable status hierarchy: the feudal system between lords and serfs. This status hierarchy is objectionable because 'lord' and 'serf' are 'normative profiles' that determine the most fundamental entitlements that individuals have *qua* members of society, such as the freedom of movement and occupation, the right to private property, and the right to participate in the political system, among others. Compare this with a hierarchical local chess club where the best players have a higher status than lower-rated players. As a result of their higher status, the best players enjoy various advantages *in the chess club*: for example, they have priority access to the chess library, can participate in inter-club competitions, and are treated with deference by lower-rated players. What makes a hierarchical chess club less objectionable, if at all, than the feudal hierarchy system is that, unlike being a 'lord' or a 'serf', the status of 'member of a chess club' is a normative profile that defines a very limited set of not very significant entitlements, which does not determine an individual's overall normative position in society. The scope of the status hierarchy, then, is much narrower.

However, the wrongness of a status hierarchy is determined not only by the kind of status that is at stake but also by the type of attitudes and behaviours that are deemed the appropriate or fitting response to the status in question. Thus, imagine a hypothetical feudal society where lords are considered talented individuals (akin to professional athletes in contemporary societies) and, as such, are admired and treated with exceptional courtesy and kindness. Arguably, this hierarchy of social esteem would still be morally problematic because *inter alia* it is based on an arbitrary property or feature. Yet, what made the actual feudal society deeply objectionable is that lords and serfs were placed in a social status hierarchy of *basic recognition respect*. The set of attitudes and behaviours displayed towards serfs involved denying that they are a source of value in and of themselves that ought to be taken into account when deliberating about the requirements of morality. Put differently, serfs were regarded as lacking the moral authority to make demands on others' behaviour – or, alternatively, to generate moral obligations that were

owed to them in particular and for their own sake. Recognition respect, however, is the most basic kind of attitude and behaviour that is owed to individuals *qua* moral equals (Anderson, 1999; Darwall, 1977; Scheffler, 2015; Schemmel, 2021). And violating a person's status as a *moral* equal is the most serious violation of their status as a *social* equal.[11] Hence, a hierarchy of social status that violates the requirement of basic recognition respect is the most objectionable form of social status hierarchy, other things being equal.

Let us now take stock. So far, I have argued that the relational wrong consists in assigning a position of inferiority to a person (or group) within a hierarchy of social status that makes it appropriate and fitting to display towards them a set of attitudes and behaviours that are incompatible with the basic recognition respect that is owed to everyone *qua* moral equals.

But why is the way in which persons (or groups) are treated as inferiors by social and political institutions of intrinsic moral significance in addition to and independently of its distributive consequences? Two aspects of the relational wrong cannot be explained by or reduced to distributive wrongs. The first is the *causal role* of institutional actions in creating, maintaining, and reinforcing, unjust disadvantage (Pogge, 2004). For example, what makes a feudal society morally objectionable is not only the fact that some individuals – 'serfs' – lack a range of significant goods (e.g. wealth) that other individuals – 'lords' – have, but also that such social disadvantage is created, maintained, and reinforced by a social order that assigns a position of superiority to a social group over another. By looking only at the significant goods that individuals have or lack, therefore, we are unable to capture the *reason why* some individuals are deprived of significant goods. Hence, a distributive framework fails to account for the wrongness of the causal role of society's institutional actions in generating and sustaining unjust disadvantages to individuals. In this sense, then, the way in which persons are treated by social and political institutions is morally significant *in addition to* its distributive effects.

Second, a distributive framework is unable to capture the *expressive dimension* of institutional actions, that is, the shared public understanding and meaning of such actions (Anderson and Pildes, 2000: 1512–1513).[12] In other words, a distributive framework cannot account for the way in which society fails to consider individuals as equals by expressing objectionable attitudes towards them. To appreciate this, take again the example of a feudal system: This social arrangement is a form of social status hierarchy where some individuals are deemed worthy of more recognition respect than others. By granting a range of goods to some individuals, the feudal system then expresses an objectionable attitude of disrespect towards those individuals who lack such goods, for it treats them as if they matter less from a moral point of view. This expressive wrong is objectionable *independently of* the resulting distributive inequality. To see this, consider a feudal society where laws are not enforced and, as a result, serfs are *de facto* not deprived of any significant good. Such a society is still unjust because serfs are treated according to principles that express an objectionable attitude of disrespect towards them, even if its laws do not result in negative distributive consequences for them.

We can now come full circle. To provide a comprehensive moral assessment of a person's (or group's) social condition, it is not sufficient to determine the (amount of) significant goods that they have or lack, but it is also necessary to examine the way in which they are treated by social and political institutions. The latter is the relational wrong: it consists in assigning a position of inferiority to a person (or group) within the social status hierarchy, such that it is appropriate to express and display a set of attitudes and behaviours towards them that is incompatible with the principle of recognition respect for equal

members of society. The relational wrong captures the intrinsic moral importance of the causal role of institutional actions in creating and maintaining unjust disadvantage as well as the expressive dimension of such actions – both of which cannot be explained by or reduced to their distributive consequences.

The Relational Wrong of Social Exclusion (1): Social Invisibility

Building on the account of the meaning and significance of the relational wrong developed in the previous section, the task of the second part of the article is to analyse the specific relational wrong(s) of social exclusion by investigating the way in which excluded individuals are treated as inferiors by social and political institutions.

My main contention is that society places and keeps excluded individuals at the very bottom of the social status hierarchy by treating them as *invisible*. I distinguish between two kinds of invisibility that identify two distinct relational wrongs of social exclusion. In this section, I argue that society treats excluded individuals as *socially invisible*, thereby ascribing to them the inferior social status of 'thing'. In the next section, I argue that marginalised individuals are also made *physically invisible* by social and political institutions, which therefore confer upon them the inferior social status of 'persona non grata'. The upshot, then, is that part of what makes social exclusion morally objectionable is that it creates the *invisible social class*.

Let us start with the concept of 'social invisibility'. Social invisibility consists in a kind of 'normative blindness', whereby its object, while being physically seen, is regarded as having no moral worth in and of itself, thereby lacking the moral standing of an entity whose fundamental interests matter for their own sake.[13] Put differently, being treated as socially invisible means being treated like a 'thing' or an 'object', that is, something that occupies a space in the physical world but has no place in the moral landscape.[14] More specifically:

> **Social invisibility**. A person (or group) is treated as socially invisible when they are assigned the inferior social status of a 'thing', which makes it appropriate and fitting to (i) express attitudes of neglect and indifference towards them, and (ii) refuse or omit to offer assistance to satisfy their basic needs.[15]

To clarify the concept of social invisibility and illustrate how it identifies a specific way in which socially excluded individuals are treated as inferiors by social and political institutions, consider the following social phenomena:

> **Security gap**. Empirical research indicates that people experiencing homelessness face a security gap compared to other members of society. For example, in the Tenderloin district – a socially deprived area of San Francisco where most homeless people live – intra-homeless violence and violence against the homeless are generally ignored by the police. Police intervention typically occurs only if and when homeless people are (perceived as) a threat to other members of society (Huey, 2012: 107–108).

> **Lack of medical assistance**. Research evidence shows that people with substance use disorder who are passed out on the streets often do not receive medical assistance. In some cases, this even leads to their preventable death. For instance, an average of five homeless deaths a day were registered across Los Angeles County in 2021, with nearly one-fourth of them happening

on the streets in *full view* of others. Specifically, 287 homeless people died on sidewalks, 24 died in alleys, and 72 were found on the pavement, with acute drug toxicity, or overdose, being the most common cause of death (Fuller, 2022).

As observed in section 2, the distributive framework allows us to identify salient aspects of the wrong involved in these social phenomena: marginalised individuals, like homeless people and individuals with substance use disorder, do not have access to significant goods, such as an adequate level of state protection and the necessary medical assistance. However, our theory of the meaning and significance of the relational wrong enables us to explain that what is also distinctively wrong with the security gap faced by homeless people and the lack of medical assistance suffered by individuals with substance use disorder is the way in which they are treated as inferiors. Specifically, by failing to protect homeless people from violence, society assigns to them the inferior social status of 'things', that is, entities that lack the moral standing to have their basic needs satisfied. The possession of this social status makes it fitting to display an attitude of indifference towards them by refraining from taking their physical integrity as a reason for action. Analogously, by ignoring the plight of drug addicts who need assistance, society puts them on a moral par with 'things': they are treated as objects that do not matter morally for their own sake, thereby making it appropriate to show an attitude of neglect towards their suffering and omit to offer them the medical assistance they need. This type of unequal treatment is incompatible with the principle of recognition respect to be regarded as an equal person whose basic interests matter for their own sake and, therefore, must be taken into account when reflecting upon what morality requires.

'Social invisibility', therefore, is a distinctive way in which marginalised individuals are not 'seen' by social and political institutions. It thus captures two salient dimensions of the wrong of social exclusion. First, it accounts for the causal role of institutional actions (or inactions) in creating an unjust disadvantage to an individual (or group). It explains why, while it is clearly wrong that, despite being especially vulnerable to violence, homeless people face reduced access to state protection, what is also independently wrong is how this security gap is created and maintained by society. This is because one of the main functions of the state is to ensure that all its members have access to an adequate level of protection from violence. However, by refusing or omitting to offer protection to people experiencing homelessness, the state treats them as if their fundamental interests do not matter – or, at least, matter much less – than those of other members of society. Similarly, it is morally objectionable that individuals with substance use disorder lack the medical assistance they need. But what is also objectionable is the reason why they do not have access to such assistance. When society lets some people die on its streets, it thereby fails to recognise them as worthy of being helped to satisfy their basic needs. This wrong generates a distinctive and additional complaint on the part of homeless people and individuals with substance use disorders: not only do they lack some significant goods, but they are deprived of such goods because those who are meant to serve and protect them fail to 'see' them as equal persons who are entitled to have their basic needs satisfied. Indeed, it is precisely this distinctive complaint against this particular mode of inferiorising treatment that socially excluded individuals consider one of the most serious forms of injustice they suffer. For example, when reflecting upon his experience as a homeless person, Delberto Dario Ruiz observes that '[o]ne of the most damaging experiences for me was being viewed as invisible and thus being ignored' (Ruiz, 1998: 105). Similarly, when describing how persons experiencing homelessness are

treated, a homeless woman in Toronto says: '[t]hey are invisible. If something was to happen to one of them, [people] would just continue on their way. They are people, but people just rush by and think that they are "things"' (Huey, 2012: 122).

Second, and relatedly, the concept of social invisibility explains the expressive wrong entailed by the institutional actions (or inactions) involved in the social phenomena under consideration. By refusing or omitting to offer protection and assistance to socially excluded individuals, society expresses an objectionable attitude of neglect and indifference towards their predicament, for it does not take their fundamental interests as a reason for action. Crucially, the expressive significance of being treated as socially invisible does not depend on its distributive effects. To illustrate, consider a society where the homeless population is a very supportive social group whose members display a strong sense of solidarity towards one another and ensure that each member is protected from violence. As a result, homeless people do not face a security gap in such a society, despite being treated as socially invisible by state officers. However, it seems implausible to argue that the absence of negative distributive consequences makes it permissible to treat people experiencing homelessness as socially invisible. On the contrary, it is morally objectionable that society attaches to homeless people an inferior value compared to that of other individuals by denying them the basic recognition respect that is owed to everyone *qua* moral equals, independently of the consequences that this violation of recognition respect brings about.

In conclusion, this discussion has two significant implications. First, it brings to light a distinctive way in which society fails to 'see' marginalised individuals as equal members. It, thus, shows that part of what is wrong with social exclusion is that society assigns a position of inferiority to excluded individuals within the social status hierarchy by conferring upon them the status of 'things', that is, objects that occupy a physical space but are not visible in the moral landscape as entities whose fundamental interests matter for their own sake. The possession of this status, in turn, makes it appropriate to display attitudes of disregard and indifference towards their plight, and refuse or omit to offer them the assistance necessary to satisfy their basic interests. Therefore, society creates a social class of individuals who are invisible from a normative standpoint and are thus excluded or rejected from the moral community.

Second, it enriches our understanding of the demands of an inclusive society of equals by identifying a kind of relational inequality, which is conceptually distinct and independent from other forms of objectionable social relations that have received more attention in the relational egalitarian literature, such as paternalism, exploitation and domination. To appreciate this, consider again the security gap faced by homeless people. When police officers ignore the safety of homeless people, this entails that they *do not see* them as equal persons whose basic interests matter for their own sake and who therefore have a right to be protected from violence. However, this neither presupposes nor entails that police officers have the authority to interfere with homeless people's own choices, take unfair advantage of them, or exercise arbitrary control over how they act. It follows from this that a society where no one is treated paternalistically, exploited, or dominated is not necessarily a society of equals. This is an important finding for relational egalitarianism: it shows, contrary to what is sometimes suggested, that the demands of relational equality cannot be reduced to fairly limited categories close to republican concerns (Pettit, 2012), and reveals that any theory of relational equality must include the avoidance of social invisibility as a distinctive requirement of the relational egalitarian ideal. Being treated as socially invisible is wrong independently of and in addition to its role in enabling other

forms of oppressive and inegalitarian relationships. Therefore, the avoidance of social invisibility is a necessary condition for the achievement of a society of equals.

The Relational Wrong of Social Exclusion (2): Physical Invisibility

In this section, I argue that being treated as socially invisible is not the only way in which excluded individuals are treated as inferiors. In addition, they are also rendered *physically invisible* by social and political institutions. Thus, 'physical invisibility' is a distinct kind of relational wrong of social exclusion.

By 'physical invisibility', I mean the set of attitudes and behaviours whereby its object is regarded not as an equal person, but as an undesirable element of the urban landscape that must be excluded or removed from it. Being made physically invisible, therefore, means being treated as a 'persona non grata', that is, someone who is not worthy of sharing the public space with other members of society. More specifically:

> **Physical invisibility**. A person (or group) is made physically invisible when they are assigned the inferior social status of 'persona non grata', which makes it appropriate and fitting to (i) express attitudes of disgust and contempt towards them, and (ii) remove or exclude them from prime public urban space.[16]

To begin with, it is important to explain the difference between 'physical invisibility' and 'social invisibility'. This will help us understand that these two kinds of invisibilities identify distinct relational wrongs of social exclusion.

As observed in the previous section, social invisibility consists in being treated like a 'thing', that is, something that occupies a space in the physical world but has no place in the moral landscape as an entity whose fundamental interests matter for their own sake. A person (or group) who is treated as socially invisible, therefore, is not visible from a moral standpoint, that is, they do not appear on our moral radar as an entity with the standing to generate moral obligations to satisfy their basic interests. Physical invisibility, instead, is the social phenomenon whereby a person (or group) is *all too visible* and, for this reason, must be pushed out of sight. Accordingly, when society makes a person (or group) physically invisible, it treats them as 'persona non grata', that is, individuals who must not be seen in public spaces. 'Social invisibility' and 'physical invisibility', therefore, describe two different ways of being socially excluded.

It might be objected that there is a tension between these two types of invisibility.[17] This is because social invisibility entails attitudes of neglect and indifference, whereas physical invisibility involves attitudes of contempt and disgust. But a person (or group) cannot be the object of both attitudes at the same time: if they are neglected, then they are not treated with contempt. If they are treated with contempt, then they are not ignored. Therefore, 'social invisibility' and 'physical invisibility' appear to be mutually exclusive.

In reply, three points are worth noticing: first, holding that social invisibility and physical invisibility are two distinct relational wrongs of social exclusion entails that socially excluded individuals (or groups) are the object of at least one of these modes of inferiorising treatment. However, it does not imply that all excluded individuals (or groups) are vulnerable to the same kinds of relational wrongs. For example, as we will see in this section, sex workers are primarily vulnerable to being made physically invisible. In contrast, homeless people are vulnerable to both social invisibility and physical invisibility.

Second, different modes of inferiorising treatment can occur in different spatial contexts. For instance, people experiencing homelessness are typically rendered physically invisible from mainstream urban spaces, such as squares and parks, whereas they are treated as socially invisible once they have been pushed out of such areas. Homeless people, therefore, are made invisible in different ways depending on the spatial context.

Third, socially excluded individuals can be rendered invisible in multiple ways by different actors. For example, consider a society where homeless individuals are made physically invisible by institutional actions that deny them access to prime public spaces, and they are treated as socially invisible by individual citizens when dwelling in these areas. In this society, people experiencing homelessness are simultaneously subjected to both physical and social invisibility by distinct agents. For this reason, I conclude that 'social invisibility' and 'physical invisibility' are two distinct yet compatible relational wrongs of social exclusion.

Let us now analyse the concept of physical invisibility in more detail. In what follows, I show that this concept identifies relevant and distinctive dimensions of the wrong of social exclusion by examining some formal and informal zoning policies and tactics that target socially excluded individuals, such as sex workers and homeless people.

> **Local prostitution policies and practices.** In Catania (Italy), prostitution is restricted to the San Berillo district, a socially deprived area characterised by poverty, and drug use and dealing. While prostitution is tolerated within the San Berillo district, punitive and repressive police measures are enforced outside this designated area to prevent prostitution from 'spreading' to other parts of the city (Di Ronco, 2022).

> **Anti-homeless law and architecture**. Homeless people are the object of a wide range of social control policies and practices. These include laws that criminalise activities and behaviours that homeless people are compelled to do in public due to the lack of a permanent dwelling (e.g., 'sit-lie' ordinances, and bans on vagrancy and panhandling), and hostile urban design strategies (e.g., anti-sleep benches and ground spikes) that modify the urban environment to prevent or discourage certain behaviours and actions, such as lying down and loitering.

I discuss these exclusionary policies and strategies in turn. The case of Catania illustrates how prostitution is typically regulated. Social and policy research on the regulation of prostitution has shown that many cities enforce local prostitution policies and practices that aim to confine such activity to deprived areas that are separated from mainstream urban spaces. To achieve this, anti-prostitution laws are selectively enforced in specific parts of the city: sex workers are fined for loitering and sometimes detained in jail if they are caught working in certain areas, whereas they are allowed to work in different urban zones of the city. These enforcement patterns push sex workers into marginal spaces, marked by various forms of disadvantage and geographically separated from prime areas, where they are less afraid of being stopped and arrested by the police. Therefore, by selectively enforcing anti-prostitution laws, society divides the space into zones: prostitution is tolerated in deprived areas that are less visible and important, whereas it is prohibited in the wealthy areas where 'more respectable' members of society live and work.

Clearly, these zoning strategies have serious detrimental consequences for sex workers: among other things, they exacerbate their vulnerability to violence by forcing them to work in less controlled and more dangerous areas and deny them easy access to support services which are often located in other areas of the city (Di Ronco, 2022). However, these are not the only reasons for objecting to such exclusionary strategies. Instead, we

must also look at the intrinsic importance of the way in which sex workers are treated by social and political institutions. This allows us to capture two significant dimensions of their unjust social condition. First, it helps us account for the moral significance of the causal role that institutional actions play in creating and perpetuating the subordination of sex workers. It shows that part of what is wrong with the social exclusion of sex workers is that they are deprived of significant goods *because* society removes or excludes them from public spaces in order to make them physically invisible to other members of society. By rendering them physically invisible, society creates, maintains, and reinforces their social disadvantage. Second, the concept of 'physical invisibility' captures the expressive dimension of these zoning strategies. It explains why, by adopting such strategies, society confers upon sex workers the inferior status of 'persona non grata', the possession of which makes it appropriate to express attitudes of disgust and contempt towards them, thereby regarding sex workers as individuals who are not worthy of living and existing in prime public spaces as equals.

Consider next the wide range of exclusionary zoning strategies that society adopts to deny people experiencing homelessness access to prime public spaces. These include anti-homeless laws, such as laws prohibiting camping or sleeping in public, sitting on sidewalks, trespassing, panhandling, and loitering (Amaral, 2021; Amster, 2003). These laws are typically not enforced equally in all urban spaces: while a zero-tolerance policy against the homeless is deployed in prime public areas – such as squares, parks and city centre streets – the same level of compliance is not enforced in deprived areas on the edge of the cities (Stuart, 2015). Thus, 'a bum on a Skid Row sidewalk would never hear this message ["move along"] because he was exactly where the cop wanted him' (Ellickson, 1996: 1028–1209).

The enactment of anti-homeless policies, however, is not the only way in which society excludes or removes homeless people from prime public spaces. 'Hostile' or 'defensive' architecture is another prominent exclusionary zoning strategy, whose aim is to design the urban environment to make it less hospitable to homeless people. This can be achieved in three different ways (De Fine Licht, 2017): first, some existing elements can be modified to limit their possible uses. For instance, 'anti-sleep benches' include armrests separating each sitting space, or curved surfaces that make it impossible to lie down or sleep on them (Rosenberger, 2017: 11). Second, some elements can be added to the urban landscape to preclude some possible uses. For example, ground spikes prevent homeless people from standing or sitting in a specific space. Finally, objects can be removed to discourage the use of some space. For instance, many cities have removed water fountains, benches, and public toilets from parks and downtown areas (Chellew, 2019).

As a result of anti-homeless laws and architecture, individuals experiencing homelessness are deprived of the opportunity to engage in various forms of social interaction and meaningfully take part in the life of the community. But the concept of physical invisibility enables us to see that what makes these zoning policies and practices intrinsically morally objectionable is also the fact that they instantiate a hierarchy of social status, which assigns a position of inferiority to people experiencing homelessness. Specifically, this relational wrong brings to light the diversity of the reasons for objecting to anti-homelessness laws and architecture. First, by enacting these exclusionary policies, society treats homeless people as inferiors by contributing to and perpetuating their exclusion from prime public spaces. Second, such policies express objectionable attitudes of disrespect. They bestow upon homeless people the inferior social status of 'persona non grata',

which makes it fitting to display attitudes of disgust and contempt towards them. Therefore, homeless individuals are regarded not as equal persons with whom to share public space but as unpleasant elements of the urban landscape, which must be made physically invisible in prime public areas to make them suitable for other members of society.[18]

At this point, it might be objected that the exclusion of certain groups is not always morally problematic. For example, it does not seem impermissible to exclude homeless people from public parks if they leave faeces in the playground sandbox, persons with substance use disorder if they leave behind dirty needles and buy drugs there from armed dealers, and individuals with mental health issues who scream at others because they create a menacing atmosphere. The behaviour of the latter groups effectively deprives others of clean and safe public spaces.[19]

In response, it should be noticed that arguing against the exclusion of certain individuals (or groups) from prime public spaces does not entail that such individuals (or groups) should be allowed to do whatever they like in those places. As Jeremy Waldron puts it, 'if public places are to be available for everyone's use, then we must make sure that their use by some people does not preclude or obstruct their use by others' (Waldron, 1991: 41). Accordingly, access to public spaces can be limited or restricted if and when someone's behaviour poses a threat to others or impedes their use of those spaces.

However, there is a difference between asserting that homeless people should not be allowed to urinate and defecate in public and holding that public toilets and water fountains should be removed from mainstream urban spaces to make them less hospitable to individuals who do not have private places to satisfy their basic needs, thereby forcing them to do so elsewhere. Similarly, although it might be permissible to exclude persons with substance use disorders from public parks if they discard used needles on the ground, excluding them by preventing bench use or loitering without a purpose is an unjust way to limit their access to and enjoyment of public spaces, ultimately pushing them into the marginal spaces of the city.[20]

To conclude, in this section, I have argued that the concept of physical invisibility accounts for a distinctive way in which society treats socially excluded individuals, like sex workers and homeless people, as inferiors. In particular, this concept allows us to explain the intrinsic moral significance of the relational wrong of exclusionary zoning strategies, including policies and practices related to prostitution regulation, and anti-homeless law and urban design. By adopting these exclusionary strategies, society places and keeps excluded individuals at the bottom of the social status hierarchy of basic recognition respect by bestowing upon them the inferior social status of 'persona non grata', the possession of which makes it appropriate to express attitudes of disgust and contempt towards them and remove or exclude them from prime public areas. Therefore, it shows that part of what is wrong with social exclusion is that it creates a class of physically invisible individuals.

Conclusion

Some of society's most vulnerable members – such as people experiencing homelessness, individuals with substance use disorders, and sex workers – live in conditions of extreme social exclusion. The wrong of social exclusion is typically explained by reference to the significant goods that socially excluded individuals lack, including their inability to establish meaningful social relationships and participate fully in society. However, in this

article, I have argued that this theoretical framework does not capture all the normative reasons for objecting to social exclusion. This is because it is unable to account for the intrinsic importance of the way in which society fails to treat marginalised individuals as equals.

To address this shortcoming, I have developed a novel relational egalitarian theory of social exclusion that identifies the distinctive ways in which socially excluded individuals are treated as inferiors. I have argued that society places and keeps excluded individuals at the very bottom of the social status hierarchy by treating them as socially invisible, or by rendering them physically invisible, or both. Specifically, they are either assigned the inferior social status of 'things', which makes it appropriate and fitting to express attitudes of neglect and indifference towards them, and refuse or omit to offer assistance to satisfy their basic needs. Or they are ascribed the inferior social status of 'persona non grata', which makes it appropriate and fitting to display attitudes of disgust and contempt towards them, and remove or exclude them from prime public urban space. Examining the various ways in which social and political institutions fail to 'see' socially excluded individuals as equals has allowed us to account for the intrinsic importance of the causal role of institutional actions in generating and sustaining their subordination, as well as the expressive dimension of exclusionary social policies and practices. It has, therefore, enabled us to see that part of what is wrong with social exclusion is that it creates the *invisible social class*.

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Notes

1. The Tenderloin in San Francisco and Kensington in Philadelphia (also known as 'the Walmart of heroin') are two notorious examples. See Kupfer (2022) and Percy (2018).
2. It is important to notice that social exclusion takes many forms and affects different people or groups in varying degrees of severity. For instance, the homeless people living on the streets of Skid Row are socially excluded in many ways: they lack sufficient resources to satisfy their basic needs, are unable to establish meaningful social relationships, and cannot participate in the main activities of civil society. In contrast, less extreme forms of social exclusion do not involve such a severe deprivation of material and social resources. For example, consider the case of wealthy non-citizen residents who lack the right to

vote in the country where they live and, for this reason, are excluded at least in one dimension. For further discussion of the different forms of social exclusion, see Barry (2002) and Wolff (2017). In this article, I focus primarily on cases of extreme social exclusion. Therefore, my aim is not to propose a theory that explains the wrongness of all forms of social exclusion. Instead, I aim to develop a theory that identifies the specific wrongs entailed by extreme forms of social exclusion. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for instructive comments on this point.

3. Notable exceptions include Elizabeth Anderson's (2011) work on racial segregation and Jonathan Wolff's (2015, 2017, 2020) work on social exclusion and relational equality. While my discussion is indebted to the work of Anderson and Wolff, it investigates cases of extreme social exclusion that have not been directly addressed by either Anderson or Wolff.

4. Notice that the significant goods can be both relational and non-relational. As we will see more clearly in section 3, what distinguishes distributive theories from relational theories is not the kind of goods persons are said to be entitled to. Rather, it is that while the former focus (primarily) on what kind of relevant goods persons ought to have, the latter are (primarily) concerned with the way in which persons ought to be treated by social and political institutions.

5. Social exclusion is deeply intertwined with homelessness. Although not all socially excluded individuals are necessarily homeless, arguably, all people experiencing homelessness are socially excluded. Political philosophers working on the issue of homelessness have argued that being homeless is wrong, *inter alia*, because it deprives individuals of their freedom. Different freedom-based accounts of homelessness have been proposed in the literature. In his seminal work on this topic, Jeremy Waldron argues that people experiencing homelessness lack *negative freedom* because they do not have a place where to perform actions without being liable to external interference (Waldron, 1991). More recently, Christopher Essert has developed a *freedom as non-domination* account, according to which the wrongness of homelessness consists in being 'under the power of others – to be dominated by them or dependent on them – in respect of where one may be' (Essert, 2016: 266). Finally, Katy Wells has argued that homelessness is morally objectionable because it deprives individuals of the social conditions necessary to exercise their *freedom as autonomy*, that is, 'the capacity to form, revise and pursue a conception of the good – an idea of the good life – or, more straightforwardly, a plan of life' (Wells, 2022: 8).The relational egalitarian theory of social exclusion developed in this article contributes to our philosophical understanding of homelessness by showing that freedom-based accounts fail to capture all the normative reasons for objecting to homelessness. As I will argue below, homelessness does not only deny individuals their freedom, but it also makes them socially and physically invisible.

6. Notice that the actual numbers are likely much higher, as violent crimes against homeless people are significantly underreported. Specifically, the NCH Report highlights that 'the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that in 2019, less than half (44%) of violent victimizations were reported to police' (NCH, 2020).

7. To be sure, I am not arguing that the opposite is true. My aim here is to show that relational wrongs are of intrinsic moral concern. I leave open the question of whether the moral relevance of distributive wrongs can be explained by and reduced to relational wrongs.

8. See also Lippert-Rasmussen (2018), O'Neill (2008), Scheffler (2003), and Schemmel (2021).

9. For a similar definition of status, see Floris and Spotorno (2023: 257).

10. For further discussion, see Anderson (2008), Kolodny (2023), Wolff (2019), and Zuehl (2024).

11. 'Moral status' and 'social status' are distinct kinds of statuses, which therefore generate different sets of entitlements and obligations. We have a set of obligations towards each other *qua* moral equals – that is, as equal members of the moral community – above and beyond which we have a set of obligations towards each other *qua* social equals – that is, as equal members of society. Hence, the more fundamental moral status serves as a benchmark against which the legitimacy of the derivative social status must be assessed.

12. For other accounts of expressivist relational egalitarianism, see Hojlund (2021), Schemmel (2021), and Voigt (2018).

13. Here I am indebted to Axel Honneth's and Sophia Moreau's work on invisibility. See Honneth (2001) and Moreau (2020: 72–73).

14. For an instructive analysis of other ways of being treated like a thing, and why sometimes being treated also, not merely, as a thing might be required by – or at least compatible with – being treated as a person, see Schroeder (2019).

15. The (i) attitudinal component and the (ii) behavioural component are individually necessary and jointly sufficient dimensions of social invisibility. However, this does not imply that 'social invisibility' is a binary notion, whereby a person (or group) is either treated as socially invisible or is not. On the contrary, 'social invisibility' is a scalar condition: a person (or group) can be treated as more or less socially

invisible. For example, a person (or group) can be treated as socially invisible in some contexts but not in others and/or by some agents but not others. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on this point.

16. Notice that the (i) attitudinal component and the (ii) behavioural component are individually necessary and jointly sufficient dimensions of physical invisibility.

17. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

18. Consider, for example, how some cities pledge to keep prime urban areas 'free of homeless' to attract tourists and investors. See Mitchell (2011).

19. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for the objection and the example.

20. For further discussion of the criminalisation of homelessness, see Morgan (2020).

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