PAMELA
JOY
CAPISTRANO

What to do when structural injustice limits democratic action? Reflections on Red-tagging and the *Padrino* system in the Philippines

Abstract: This paper confronts two related challenges that face contemporary struggles against structural injustice: How informal democratic action against structural injustice is often stymied by the context of structural injustice; and how to centre the role of interpersonal relations in structural injustice, without these relations being co-opted by an individualistic, liberalist view of 'justice' which serves to further entrench injustice. By reflecting on the Philippine phenomena of red-tagging (the repression of activists by calling them 'communists' and 'terrorists') and the *padrino* system (informal systems of patronage and power suffused across Philippine life), and on the literature on structural injustice, this paper points to possibilities for moving past these challenges.

Introduction

Dara Bascara's work shows us how oppression occurs and is experienced in the everyday lives of people, not just in and through the state and other formal institutions. Thus, democratic struggles for justice must occur, not just on the level of the state and other similar formal institutions of governance, but on the level of the social, on the level of interpersonal and informal relations. However, the dominant practices and institutions of liberalism today have taken this insight and have co-opted its rhetoric to entrench existing injustice. We see this, for example, in how the discourse on the anthropogenic causes of climate justice was coopted by British Petroleum and other corporate interests, deflecting attention from the greater responsibility of multinational corporations and governments for anthropogenic climate change (Clarke, 2022). We see it too in how the abstract concepts of human rights have frequently been co-opted by neoliberal institutions and used as 'opium of the people' in Colombia, even as these human rights have been key to advancing indigenous resistance against oppression, as Montesinos Coleman (2024) recounts.

The concept of structural injustice, particularly the account from Iris Marion

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Young and its later developments, sought to address the day-to-day social processes in which people experience injustice, moving past the limitations of liberal theories of justice, especially past the influence of John Rawls. Though Rawls (1971) acknowledged the role that social structures played in injustice, he did not have much to say on them as this was the realm of 'non-ideal theory,' and his focus in his theory of justice was an abstract, ideal theory. Rawls's dominant influence on political theory in the final decades of the 20th century thus had the detrimental effect of narrowing political theory's focus on the individual and on the state, to the exclusion of the interpersonal and informal social relations that nonetheless form important parts of the experience of oppression.

Young's focus on structural injustice was, in contrast to and in resistance against Rawls, not abstracted from reality, but rooted in the real experiences of injustice that people lived in their daily lives (Jaggar, 2009; Young, 2011/1990: 15–38; 2013: 43–74). This specificity is what lends the concept of structural injustice its appeal and effectiveness, thus in this paper I explore how much Young's ideas, as well as Sally Haslanger's ontology of social structures, help us better understand the dynamic of interpersonal and informal social relations in relation to injustice. However, while the application of the concept has extended beyond the context of feminist critical social theory in which it originally developed, most of these applications examine structural injustices that are themselves formalized and institutionalized, or otherwise deeply intertwined with formal institutions.[1] This focus on formal and institutional structural injustices, though important and necessary, can lead scholars to overlook how interpersonal and informal relations are also sites of structural injustice.

In this paper I show how resistance can be nipped in the bud by these interpersonal and informal relations, by focusing on the injustices experienced in and through these relations. Or, to put in another way, I show that focusing on interpersonal and informal relations allows us to recognise that democratic action against structural injustice is often stymied by its very social structural context. Recognising this possibility of foreclosing resistance, we also face the challenge of how to centre interpersonal and informal relations in discussions of structural injustice *without* these being another source of foreclosure. This time, the foreclosure results from the co-optation by an individualistic, liberalist view of 'justice' which serves to further entrench injustice. This argument is not

1 See McKeown (2024); her conception of deliberate structural injustice in particular focuses on formal institutions and the greater responsibility for justice people in positions of power within those institutions have in comparison to the general public. As Agra al (forthcoming 2027) argue, this conception of deliberate structural injustice must make greater room for informal relations that are nonetheless wielded by those in positions of power.

only aided by, but also rooted in, reflections on current experiences of structural injustice in the Philippines that highlight the power of interpersonal and informal relations — namely, red-tagging and the *padrino* system. By reflecting on these examples, I am by no means saying that the Philippines is exceptional in the occurrence of these phenomena; rather, I do this to keep the discussion firmly rooted in lived realities of injustice.

Democratic action, red-tagging, and patronage: Informality and the case of the Philippines

The term 'democratic action' may be associated with the formal institutions and functions of a state or an organization on the one hand, or the words and deeds of individuals coming together through shared principles on the other. In the feminist critical theory literature that Young's conception of structural injustice emerged from, it refers to the latter. However, in the everyday language of the Philippines, 'democratic action' most often carries the former formal and institutional connotation. If my past undergraduate students are any indication, they more often think of 'democratic action' as the actions of institutions and statecraft far removed from their personal experience, less so as the actions of an engaged democratic populace critically reflecting on the social structures in which they live. This association between democratic action and formal institutions has been exacerbated by the presidential term of Rodrigo Duterte from 2016–2022, and the re-emergence of 'red tagging' during his administration.[2]

Red-tagging first emerged in the Philippines in the 1970s, during the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. Marcos Sr justified declaring Martial Law (and installing himself as dictator) as the only proper response to the violence committed by the insurgent Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army (CPP-NPA), particularly a bombing at a political rally which killed multiple bystanders and injured prominent opposition politicians.[3] During the dictatorship, being labelled a 'Communist rebel' or more simply, a 'red' would be enough pretext to be kidnapped, illegally detained, and/or disappeared, whether or not one was truly a member of the CPP-NPA. The term 'red tagging'

2 Both 'red-tagging' and 'red tagging' are used in the Philippines; for this paper, I have chosen to use the former for consistency and to avoid potential confusion.

3 While some historians and a survivor of the bombing claim that the CPP-NPA was responsible for the Plaza Miranda bombing (Salice, 2022, Dizon, 2002), other credible sources claim that this was one of several plots engineered by the Marcos government to justify the declaration of Martial Law and the Marcos dictatorship (Ciment, 2015; Mijares, 1976/2017).

thus was a convenient way to designate this phenomenon. It slowly fell out of use as a term in the years after the 1986 EDSA Revolution and the end of the dictatorship, only to be revived again with Duterte's rise to power.

The most recent iteration of red-tagging painted acts of public protest and political critique as anti-social, destructive, and anti-state (Thongyoojaroen, 2023). As in the Martial Law era, public protest was associated with the communist insurgency, but by this time the CPP-NPA was a formal institution with legal recognition, albeit as an alleged 'terrorist organization' (Office of the President Republic of the Philippines, 2017).[4] Now, though, the term has extended to targeting journalists who have reported stories critical of the state and/or of government officials (NUJP, 2024), and the act of labelling has become more commonplace over social media.

Red-tagging continues even in the current presidential administration of Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. The majority of the red-tagging that occurs today happens through social media (NUJP, 2024) — through content produced by internet personalities, vloggers, and influencers who are *not* affiliated with formal media institutions or with the state *but* are recognized informally by the state (Mendoza, 2023). Despite some success against red-tagging in the courts through cases filed by victims, these social media content creators continue to portray activists as threats to national stability rather than people participating in democratic action.[5] This in turn discourages further participation in civic activism especially among the youth, primarily due to the online and offline harassment they experience after being identified as activists and being informally red-tagged in their communities (Amnesty International, 2024).

This chilling effect of red-tagging on Philippine social media is one example of the social practices that sociologists have called *informality* — the unspoken but shared rules and hidden practices that often escape official formal description and discussion (Ledeneva, 2018a). Traditional approaches in the social sciences have taken formal social institutions as central to understanding human societies and cultures and informal structures and relations as merely peripheral; contemporary scholarship on informality challenges this by showing that informality is not only central to community life and culture but also

4 This was preceded by the US State Department declaring the organization a terrorist organization in 2002 (Directorate of National Intelligence, 2025).

5 In 2024, two court cases brought to action by victims of red-tagging yielded landmark rulings. In the case of Deduro v. Vinoya, the Supreme Court of the Philippines ruled that red tagging was a threat against 'a person's right to life, liberty, or security' (2024). The libel case filed by journalist Atom Araullo in the civil courts opened a new avenue for redress of victims of red-tagging — filed as a civil suit, because Araullo asserts that libel should be decriminalized — the court found the defendants guilty of libel and granted damages. See CMFR (2024), Daguno-Bersamina (2024), Gatchalian and Lee (2024).

captures the complexity of human society with more accuracy than the focus on formal institutions ever could (Ledeneva, 2018a).

This turn towards informality is reflected in sociological studies in the Philippines as well, which has moved in the last century from examining inequalities caused by formal institutions (such as the different forms of colonialism the Philippines experienced under the Spanish and the US), to examining social phenomena that reflect the embeddedness and complexity of informal relations, informal and formal social structures and institutions.[6]

One such phenomenon is the patron-client or patronage relation (or its specifically Philippine form, the '*padrino* system') and how its effects extend beyond interpersonal relations into maintaining political and economic and domination by the few over the many. In the patronage system, the often tedious and opaque bureaucratic and administrative structures of government are bypassed if one has a powerful *padrino* whom one can approach for help. This system of patronage is largely informal, though it intersects with the formal structures and institutions of local and national government because of how politicians occupy the position of *padrino* and how it is deployed to maintain their political power, especially during elections (Aspinall et al., 2022).

In patronage politics, politicians use, even hijack, government funds and programs as a means of supporting their position of power, even diverting public funds to provide direct assistance to help constituents in various ways including paying for hospital bills, building bridges, or even giving cash directly in exchange for votes (Aspinall et al., 2022; Hutchcroft, 2014). This 'assistance' is 'repaid' through personal loyalty and favours one's *padrino* might ask for in the future; in some cases, this loyalty extends to avoiding public statements and actions that can seem remotely critical of one's patron.[7] Through the demand for loyalty as the other side of the reciprocal relationship, the possible mechanisms for resistance against this unjust social structure of patronage are foreclosed by the very mechanisms of patronage. This is reflected in the continuing power wielded by the patron class (Teehankee and Calimbahin, 2019), despite the post-Marcos dictatorship constitutional and civil reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, ostensibly to support and strengthen Philippine democratic institutions and public participation. As Abinales and Amoroso presciently asserted 20 years

6 This broadening in scholarship can be seen in the contrast between David (2004), a widely-read sociology textbook that emphasizes formal institutions, and Kusaka (2017).

7 There is a significant amount of scholarship from history, political science, and sociology on various aspects and effects of patronage in the Philippines. See Aspinall et al. (2022), Wong and Lara-de Leon (2020), Heywood (2018), Ledeneva (2018b), Hutchcroft (2014), Anderson (1988) and Scott (1972).

after Marcos Sr's ouster:

> Instead of a new order, a mutation evolved in which the principal elements of the old order (patronage politics; the spoils system; a politicized military; even a rehabilitated Imelda Marcos, the former president's wife) have appropriated the themes and the practices of the new (democracy, civil society, developmentalism, popular participation) in order to take control of the postauthoritarian state (Abinales and Amoroso, 2006: 295).

Red-tagging and patronage, as we have seen, are undoubtedly unjust social structures — patterns of social practices and relationships which coalesce together in ways that perpetuate inequality and the repression of democratic participation, and themselves foreclose or suppress the possibility of resistance against its own injustice. Moreover, both red-tagging and patronage involve a complex mix of interpersonal/informal social relations and formal institutions, which makes institutional or state-level intervention insufficient remedies against these injustices. This leads us to the question — can the existing literature on structural justice offer us a better understanding not only of why these structures are unjust, but also of why they are so persistent? It is to this literature we now turn.

Structural Injustice: From Young to Haslanger

Iris Marion Young is the first contemporary political theorist to deliberately focus on the concept of structural injustice (McKeown, 2021: 2; Sankaran, 2021: 1). Arguably, the concept of injustice vis-a-vis social structures can be traced as far back the beginnings of workers' movements and its articulations in Marx and his contemporaries, but its most popular formulation in political theory today has undeniably been Young's (McKeown, 2021). Her focus on structural injustice is not only an outcome of her own activism beyond the academy but is also a response to the limitations of distributive justice theory, as exemplified in the work of John Rawls (Young, 2011/1990: 15–38; 2013: 43–74).

In her work, Young asserts that structural injustice is distinct from injustice that comes about directly because of the actions of individuals, groups, or institutions. Instead, structural injustice has to do with an individual's position within their social-structural context (Young, 2013: 45). This social-structural context, in turn, is not the outcome of one or a few actions, or a single institutional policy, but is borne of social processes. Thus, structural injustice is not solely attributable to 'wrongs of individual interaction', nor is it just a case of bad luck, nor is it attributable to any single law or policy targeted against a particular

group of people (Young, 2013: 45–46).

She first arrives at the concept of structural injustice through an extended reflection on the anti-sweatshop movement across North American college campuses in the early 2000s. Young intended to articulate why student activists felt responsible for the exploitation of garments workers — in sweatshops often on the other side of the world — who made the clothes sold at campus stores (Young, 2003; 2006; 2007). As Young later develops in more detail in the posthumous *Responsibility for Justice* (2013), this sense of responsibility is rooted not in a sense of personal liability but rather from a sense of participating in social structures that are themselves unjust, and the realization that the injustice is perpetuated by one's very participation in these social structures.

Moreover, structural injustice is often so much a part of the social fabric that it is easy to overlook and can often seem unavoidable. As Young explains, 'Many policies, both public and private, and the actions of thousands of individuals acting according to normal rules and accepted practices contribute to producing these circumstances' (2013: 47). Implicit in this articulation is the recognition that the unjust social structures that people are part of are composed not just of *formal* institutions, but rather also include the *informal* social practices and relations that we take for granted, and the ordinary daily actions individuals take within both these formal and informal relations. Structural injustice thus arises from the (formal and informal) social structures that people participate in, which can be stacked unfairly to the advantage of some, to the detriment of others. As she concludes:

> Structural injustice, then, 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, 2013: 52).

While many scholars have developed this conception of structural injustice further,[8] for the purposes of this paper, the work of Sally Haslanger (2012; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2021a; 2021b; 2022) is the most illuminating, as she not only develops a social ontology that articulates the genesis of unjust social structures in and through our social relations with each other and the material world; she also illuminates how individual agency is enmeshed in social structures (regardless of their justness or lack thereof).

8 Most notably, McKeown (2024)'s work on distinguishing different types of structural injustice and Nuti's (2019) development of the idea applied to reproducing historical injustices.

In her account, *social structures* result from social practices, which are in turn the results of following shared *cultural technē* — patterns of behaviours relating to resources (Haslanger, 2018: 231–232), or as Haslanger states more specifically, these are 'intersubjective patterns of perception, thought, and behaviour…embodied in individuals as a shared cluster of open-ended dispositions to see things a certain way or to respond habitually in particular circumstances' (2012: 415). These schemas can be quite local to a particular social group, or can be common to broader societies, but nonetheless share the same general features. While these schemas are cultural, they are also individually instantiated — there is a continual interaction between our individual *technē* and the culture around us. An example that Haslanger offers to illustrate this is the schema of the family — there is a certain range of behaviours, activities, and attitudes that are associated with 'family' that we tend to assume and take for granted as broadly understood. There's a certain degree of shared understanding — what Haslanger variously calls 'shared meanings' or 'social meanings' — of what people in families ought to do (e.g. care for each other, fulfil parental responsibilities to children) and ought not to do (e.g. abandon children and hurt them). At the same time, particular individuals can have their own instantiations of these schemas (e.g. as a mother, I consider it is my maternal responsibility to show my daughter that women and men both oughts to handle housework, in contrast to the norm in my social group, where housework is considered a 'feminine' activity).

To take the example further, it's important to notice how the behaviours, activities, and attitudes of being part of a family have much to do with how people manage not only themselves and their mental states, but also include the world around them — the physical world that allows us to feed and clothe our families, to be sure, but also the sets of objects that we associate with families, the systems of knowledge related to family life, and so on. These are what Haslanger refers to as *resources*. Resources account for the materiality of social structures (2012: 415) but also include non-material things such as knowledge and status. Thus, a resource is *anything that is of value* to people (whether positively or negatively), the use of which requires the coordination among people.[9]

Moreover, cultural *technē* and resources have a 'looping' relationship with each other — that is, they sustain each other, and this allows them to remain stable and adaptive over time (Haslanger, 2015; 2018; 2022). The kinds of resources

9 Haslanger discusses this in the various essays cited, but a good summary can be found in 'How to Change a Social Structure' (2022).

that we value and that are available to us influence the norms of our culture; conversely the norms of our culture influence how we value the resources at hand. To return to the example of the schema of a family, we can see how it can influence the way we relate to resources in the world — for example, how one considers the suitability of a house in terms of how it accommodates children. Conversely, changing resources in the world can modify my schema of the family — for instance, more recent medical and psychological knowledge about early childhood development has changed how my generation perceives the value of early childhood education and preschool, compared to my grandparents' generation.

Thus, taken together, cultural *technēs* and resources form social practices. As Haslanger summarises:

> Social practices are patterns of learned behaviour that enable us (in the primary instances) to coordinate as members of a group in creating, distributing, managing, maintaining, and eliminating a resource (or multiple resources), due to mutual responsiveness to each other's behaviour and the resource(s) in question, as interpreted through shared meanings/cultural schemas (2018: 245).

Haslanger further asserts that social practices are what result in social structures. Social practices are what establish socially accepted roles and relations (such as the informal categories of people and the roles they fulfil within these practices) to ease coordination (Haslanger, 2021b). Power comes into play in these roles and relations as well, as certain roles are powerful in comparison to other roles within the network of relations. This network of roles and the different relations between these roles *qua* roles is a *social structure*. These social structures can be unjust particularly when the social practices entrench relationships of domination that unfairly regulate the relationships between individuals and their access to resources.

From this account, we can begin to understand how the informal social relationships between individuals in differing positions of power, and how these power differences exist aside from and in interaction with formalized and institutionalized social structures. Social structures are the result of the repetition of cultural *technēs* — whether these are formalized or informal — that regulate individuals' relationships to a resource that they consider valuable. Thus, structural injustices are unlike the injustices of individuals against each other (e.g. moral liabilities), and unlike the obligations between individuals and the formal institutions of the state.

Moreover, this account highlights how the reasons a specific group of people

value a resource are not simply imposed by state institutions, or even by programmes at the level of non-government or people's organizations. Nor are the cultural *technēs* that regulate access to these resources simply a product of these formalized social structures. Rather, they come about in the culturally embedded, day-to-day relations and exchanges of the people within these social structures. This cultural element also accounts for why structural injustices can be taken for granted, easily receding to the background of daily experience. By focusing intervention and resistance against structural injustice on the level of formal institutions alone, as liberal theories of justice and liberal interventions have done for the past two to three decades, these informal relations and practices of injustice have been ignored. These informal relations and practices have continued to be reproduced unabated, to the detriment of movements towards justice.

The challenges posed by informality: the Philippines, revisited

In the previous section, I have sketched how the literature on structural injustice, and particularly the work of Haslanger, highlights the crucial role played by informal social relations in the re/production of social structures. This literature gives us more tools for the articulation and critique of structural injustices that we experience, as well as accounting for how these injustices can be perpetuated by our participation in social structures, without us being aware of it. However, in drawing from and reflecting on the structural injustices in their specific life-worlds (the intersection of gender, race, and class, and the long shadow of white settler colonialism in North America), it is easy to find concrete examples of how informal democratic actions eventually led to more formal social-structural change, such as that of Civil Rights Movement or more recently the Standing Rock Protests.

While these concrete experiences of struggles for social justice in North America have led to valuable theorizing, we must also think about and theorize from outside this context. I am not saying that the ideas and theories of structural injustice generated from the North American context have not been helpful for others outside that context — they have. Rather, if we are to take seriously the spirit of the feminist critical social theory of Young, we must recognise that theorising about structural injustice, when grounded in a different context of structural injustice, may add new dimensions to our understanding. In the Global South, different peoples experience and grapple with structural injustices that emerge from different sets of reasons for valuing resources, different cultural *technēs*, different types of colonial regimes, and different forms of neo-colonial or neo-imperialist domination. What can these experiences add to and reveal

about structural injustice? As Getachew and Mantena (2021) challenge, we must generate a political theory from the specificity of our experiences, not just the experiences of 'the West'.

The context of the Philippines is one such example of specificity. In what follows, I sketch one of Haslanger's proposals for how to change a social structure, then use it to show how the informal social relations of both red tagging and the *padrino* system are conditions partly illuminated, but not easily critiqued, through the existing structural injustice literature.

Resisting structural injustice and promoting social change: interpellation

Haslanger develops the concept of interpellation, which she draws from Althusser's work on ideology (Haslanger, 2017; 2021a), to explain how the different individuals who participate in a social structure come to slowly realize that the structure is unjust and take collective action to address injustice. One concrete example of interpellation that she sketches is *consciousness raising* — a form of critique and collective action that has a long and storied history in both political theory and praxis (Haslanger, 2021a, 2021c).

Haslanger draws from a variety of sources, including the experience of a group of girls at a US high school; feminist writing on social protest; and the pragmatist moral epistemology of Elizabeth Anderson (2021a). She roughly describes consciousness raising as a process of moving from a reaction, to a complaint, and eventually to a moral claim; she also proposes a more specific series of steps which I shall not discuss here as, for this paper's purposes, a simplified overview of the process will suffice.

As Haslanger writes, 'Consciousness raising calls attention to the frame, and its effects. In primary cases, it does so in a first-person way: *we* are living within this unacceptable frame and *we* need to change it' (2021a: 205). It requires calling attention to the frame of our experience through the negative effects it has, and who it affects the worst. Though it may begin from an individual's feeling of frustration, it '[enables] one to move beyond…to a collective and historically rooted understanding of the situation' (2021c: 48). Such an understanding, done collectively, results in what she describes in both texts as a paradigm shift, altering one's orientation and relation to others and the world. As this paradigm shift necessarily changes the ways we relate to each other and to the resources we value in common, it necessarily changes our cultural technē.

This, however, is easier said than done; as Haslanger points out, group participation is a must in order not only to further understand and clarify the

structural nature of the injustice (e.g. how it affects people who occupy different positions, identifying which positions are the worst off); but also in the creation of counter-publics, spaces where the group can discuss the injustice without censure from the dominant group (2021c: 46–52); as well as in the formulation and testing of a new paradigm that can eventually be offered as an alternative (2021a: 204). This may eventually lead to not just changes in informal social relations, but also to the reform or abolition of older formal social structures, or the creation of new ones to codify these changes. There are many examples of this from the North American experience; the feminist and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 70s are the easiest to identify.

Most illuminating, however, is the experience of high school girls that Haslanger reflects on, and the actions they took upon learning that their male schoolmates systematically ranked them on a numerical scale based on their physical attractiveness (Haslanger 2021a). This revelation came about through gossip, word-of-mouth, and social media. Dissatisfied with the school administration treating the event as an isolated transgression (the only action taken being giving detention to the boy who started the list) a group of three female friends from one class decided to organize a protest attended by 40 female students. This in turn led to a dialogue with the school administration, then to a school-wide program on International Women's Day, led and facilitated by female students, where they shared testimonies of their experiences of objectification, sexual harassment, and abuse. The female students said they wanted to change the school culture around gender and sexuality and have organized weekly meetings among their peers to discuss these topics. (Haslanger 2021a; Schmidt 2019).

In this example, all the institutional and formal responses to this incident of female objectification only arose — and endured — out of the informal relations of female students. Even the revelation of the list itself only happened because of informal social relations — the whisper network, gossip, sharing things with friends. These informal social relations are contexts in which the different agents within a social structure can interrogate their social practices, subject them to critique, and explore possibilities for changing these practices and the values that underlie these social practices.

Foreclosing the possibility of collective action

While similar collective processes of interpellation — of critique, consciousness raising and collective action — have undeniably happened in the Philippines, there are additional challenges that are not (yet) completely accounted for in the literature of structural injustice. Some structures of injustice as experienced

in the Philippines are difficult to critique and to change/act against, not only because they recede into the background as part of cultural practices, but also and more importantly because they contain within themselves mechanisms that foreclose the possibility of critique and action.

We see this in the phenomenon that I began this paper with — red tagging — and the chilling effect it has had on ordinary people's participation in various forms of informal and formal collective action. Red tagging, while exhibiting features of structural injustice as described above, also features an additional element of inhibiting the possibility of critiquing this structure and its underlying social relations, through its demonisation. The demonisation of protest and resistance, and its equation with 'terrorism', is a familiar phenomenon globally (we have seen this most recently, for instance, in the UK government's response to Palestine Action), though with differing forms and varieties depending on the social-cultural context. By reflecting on the Philippine form of the phenomenon and its social, cultural, and historical specificities, I hope to nonetheless surface commonalities that can benefit the global conversation on structural injustice.

Within the Philippine legal system, the right to organize and to assembly is protected by the 1987 Constitution. However, outside of the legal system, organizing and activism is equated with the recruitment of young people into the CPP-NDF. To criticize this equation as an oversimplification is, at best, challenging cultural values of stability, collectivism, and cooperation; at worst, it is taken as tacit support for terrorism.[10] Moreover, the state has indirectly lent its power to informal non-state actors — the aforementioned 'political vloggers' who operate independently of the state and of mainstream media.[11]

While red tagging involves both informal and formal features of structural injustice, the separation between the two is difficult. More importantly, the possibility of critiquing the social structure is foreclosed before it even begins. This foreclosure of the possibility of critique and collective action is something that scholars suggest has its roots in the particularities of the United States' occupation and colonization of the Philippines, and how they coopted mechanisms of education and critique — ostensibly to prepare the natives for

10 See for instance Montaña (2023) who (ironically enough) uses Habermas and Rawls to argue that the regulation of student activism doesn't violate students' rights in light of the threat of destabilization and terrorism. It is interesting to note as well how the historical archives yield a similar argument against student activism in the Philippines, but from 50 years ago — see Samonte (1970).

11 The most obvious example of this has been the transition of the 'political vlogger' Lorraine Badoy from social media personality, to official of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) during the Duterte administration, and back to social media personality at the end of Duterte's time in office. See Philstar.com (2017), Parrocha (2021) and Torres-Tupas (2024).

eventual self-governance, but in practice to pacify and limit collective action, to quell the resistance against the US and prevent future uprisings (Azada-Palacios, 2024; Agra, 2026; Agra, 2024; Agra et al., forthcoming 2027).

US colonialism blended the formal structures of American educational institutions with the informal relations of kinship and the *padrino* system coopted from the local cultures as part of its system of governance, masking the repression of political agency with the project of educating future Filipino leaders. As Azada-Palacios writes, 'Motivated both by "civilizing" as well as imperial aspirations, the American educational project eventually settled into an uneasy equilibrium: it became a project that encouraged self- governance but not self-determination' (2024: 36). The result of this policy? Locals were given an education that allowed them to be bureaucrats and to fulfil the manpower demands of the colonial administration, yet the ultimate agency and decision-making power remained in the hands of the colonial officials.

The limitation of agency does not end here — even informal relations were co-opted by the colonial regime, particularly the *padrino* system, the patronage relationship that I described at the beginning of this paper. We can trace the origins of patronage relationships in the Philippines to pre-colonial social structures that centred on tribal 'big men' (locally called datus), upon whose power the community's well-being rested (Edgerton, 2008; Wong and Lara-de Leon, 2020). By the Spanish colonial era, it had further developed to integrate the *padrino* system of creating reciprocal relationships between those of lower and higher social and economic status through godparenthood (Wong and Lara-de Leon, 2020). This relationship was further exploited by the American colonial officials, taking advantage of the personalistic system by installing their local protégés, who in turn fostered political, social, and economic dependency among those of lower status (Edgerton, 2008; Hutchcroft, 2014) — implemented in an almost formalised and systematic way across the Philippine archipelago. Without a *padrino*, the ordinary, lower status citizen has little to no agency and power. Moreover, the demand for loyalty in exchange for the 'help' the *padrino* provides further disincentivises critical speech and protest. Thus, the possibility of critique and action — of *interpellation*, as Haslanger calls it — is foreclosed through informal social relations.

Interpellation: The groundedness of informality versus the abstraction of formality

Does this mean, then, because of the foreclosure of the possibility of interpellation in both red-tagging and the patronage system, that resistance against these structural injustices is futile? While it is tempting to stop at this as a plausible

conclusion, bringing to bear the other aspects of Haslanger's social ontology might point to a plausible and fruitful direction. While Haslanger's work does not directly address the question of *how* to address these foreclosures, her tools may allow us to investigate their inner workings and unexpected complications. One observation easily made is that both red-tagging and patronage politics serve to regulate, even hinder, ordinary folk's access to political power. Conserving political power in the hands of the elite is the 'resource' that underlies and drives the social practices that constitute both unjust social structures. Recognizing this further allows us to probe into what, if any, interventions or interpellations have been attempted in the past to resist, change, or disrupt these practices of conservation, and understand why these failed.

In Philippine history, the most recent significant intervention to disrupt both red-tagging and the *padrino* system was the EDSA Revolution of 1986 that ousted Marcos Sr and ended his dictatorship. In the immediate aftermath of this 'peaceful revolution', under the presidency of Corazon Aquino, the broad coalition that backed her attempted to begin institutionalising what they saw as key reforms to prevent another Marcosian dictatorship from happening again. They started with the drafting and ratification of a new constitution, the reform of local government to decentralise political power from the capital, the implementation of 'genuine agrarian reform' to finally break up the haciendas,[12] and the restoration of democratic institutions that Marcoses destroyed such as the free press. They also established commissions to bring to justice the Marcoses and recover the millions of dollars of funds siphoned from national coffers into the pockets of Marcos and his cronies. There was a sense that re-establishing these institutions and instating these reforms would sow the seeds of social change in the country. As historians Abinales and Amoroso (2006: 295) put it:

> Soon after Marcos fell from power [in 1986] left-wing academics described the presidency of his successor, Corazon Aquino, as a strange coalition of reformers, human rights activists, moderates, leftists, military coup plotters, former Marcos officials, and traditional politicians. As such, it was a regime straight out of the notebook of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci as he reflected on the fate of the left while languishing in jail. Although elements of

12 *Hacienda* in the Philippine context refers to the quasi-feudal plantation estates held by families and run by *sakadas* (tenant farmers), a system started during Spanish colonisation, continued by the Americans, and persisted even through postwar independence. Marcos Sr began implementing a land reform and land distribution program from the earliest years of his administration, but this was coupled with exemptions and strict regulations for export crops like sugar. See Murray (1972), Overholt (1976), Almeda Martin (1999) and Ateneo Martial Law Museum (n.d).

> the old order were in a state of decay, the building blocks of the new system were not yet fully embedded politically and socially. The hope was to ensure that the old would completely wither away, and the new would blossom. This was the agenda of the progressive wing of the Aquino coalition.

However, these broad institutional reforms did not translate to greater social structural justice. Instead, the language, practices, and themes of the institutional reformists were appropriated by the traditional political elites to further secure their power.

Why did these post-Marcos Sr reforms not translate into enduring change, and what made them easy to co-opt and appropriate? One possible reason is how these reforms focused on *formal social structures* like institutions of the state, without significantly addressing the *informal* social structures that also kept power in the hands of the few. As we have seen in the earlier discussion of structural injustice, social structures are perpetuated by the continued participation of agents in social practices and cultural *technēs*, many of which are informal in nature, whether exercised in interpersonal relationships or relationships across larger groups of people. Formal social structures such as state institutions are merely specific instantiations of broader practices and *technēs*. Formal institutional reform does not lead to enduring change and greater justice if it is not coupled with challenging the more informal social relations.

Changing unjust structures is not simply a matter of formal institutional reform, but also of continually challenging and, to use Haslanger's term again, continually interpellating the informal social practices and cultural *technēs* that we take for granted but are nonetheless integral components of social structures. We can create legislative bodies and fair election mechanisms to elect legislators to power, but without changing the cultural *technēs* and social practices on the ground that keep patronage relations in place, the same political patrons of the past will keep getting elected to these legislative bodies. These formal institutions become just another *technē*, just another mechanism that is incorporated into the structural injustice.

Pushing the conversation forward

In her recent book *Struggles for the Human: Violent Legality and the Politics of Rights*, Lara Montesinos Coleman (2024) grapples with the complex history and often violent reality of human rights and human rights discourse in and through the concrete realities of contemporary Colombian politics. As I briefly alluded to at the very beginning of this paper, contemporary views of human rights are often depicted as polarised: people are seen to be split between its

ardent supporters who embrace it as crucial in struggles for justice, and its critics who consider it too 'western' in its origins and too complicit in perpetuating continued global inequality. Coleman argues that to accept this characterisation is to ignore reality, to 'bypass the politics of struggle' (2024: 4). This dichotomy is convenient for rhetoric but does not faithfully capture the realities on the ground. If we look at concrete struggles for justice, we find that it is not a matter of a duality of views or even of a spectrum of views about rights. Rather, we come to realize that concrete struggles are *where the discourse is created* (Coleman, 2024: 14–16).

She further argues that when human rights are used to bolster and justify perpetuating an unjust status quo, it is because they have been abstracted from people lived struggles. She writes:

> [W]hen human rights are most tightly yoked to existing structures of power, this is not because they are inextricably tied to liberal individualism or because they serve to inculcate docile forms of subjectivity, but because they are taken up as abstract values that can then be fixed neatly within an existing order of things (Coleman 2024: 4–5).

I think these insights help us reframe the phenomena of red-tagging and patronage in Philippines, and the intertwined challenges of how structures of injustice foreclose resistance against them and of how to centre the role of informal, interpersonal relations in structural injustice, without these relations being co-opted by entrenched power. There is an analogous relation between what Coleman describes as 'human rights as abstracted values' that can be 'fixed neatly' and 'structural injustice as formal institutions', especially apparent in the example of the failure of post-Marcos Sr reforms.

The failure in those reforms is not that the ideas behind the reforms were wrong, or fundamentally co-opted by 'western neo-colonial powers', as contemporary detractors say. Rather, the failure lies in how these reforms focused on formal institutions of injustice without significantly addressing the informal, relational aspects of structural injustice. In practice, though not deliberately, this virtually exclusive focus led to these 'reformed' formal institutions being abstracted from the struggles that birthed the desires for reform in the first place. This abstraction is what made it easy for reformed institutions to be co-opted by entrenched power — they could be 'fixed neatly' into the existing structural injustice as just another set of social practices.

There are no simple answers to the challenges of foreclosed resistance to structural injustice and continuing to centre informal, interpersonal relations in struggles against structural injustice. But what reflection has revealed is that

these challenges are not problems to be solved, which can lead to the dangers of abstraction, but rather struggles to be lived. Resistance against red-tagging cannot remain at the level of legal interventions — though these are themselves of value — but must confront the lived struggles and concerns that are at the root of both red-tagging (and the accompanying fear of 'instability' or dissent) and of the dissenting, activist voices who receive the label (and the accompanying fear for one's safety and life). Resistance against the *padrino* system of patronage politics cannot stop at the (already voluminous) academic study of patronage and its effects and the push for institutional and technocratic reforms. Not that these academic studies and institutional reforms are unimportant, but rather because they always run the risk of being abstracted from the reality of struggle. The literature on structural injustice, and the vocabulary it has given us to identify, name, articulate the injustices we confront, while helpful, must continually be enriched by the lived realities of our struggles.

Pamela Joy Capistrano
Assistant Professor
Department of Philosophy
Ateneo de Manila University
pmariano@ateneo.edu

the global justice network

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