

# Responsibility and Ignorance: On Dismantling Structural Injustice

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**Clarissa Rile Hayward**, Washington University in St. Louis

This essay tackles the thorny question of how to dismantle structural racial injustice. It engages Iris Marion Young's work on responsibility for structural justice. But it also draws on Charles Mills's work on what Mills calls white epistemologies of ignorance to challenge Young's emphasis on changing how racially privileged people understand their responsibilities. It makes the case that disruptive politics play a crucial role in dismantling structural injustice. Because they interrupt privileged people's motivated ignorance, disruptive politics create a political opening to institutionalize structural change.

In its famous 1974 case, *Milliken v. Bradley* (418 US 717), the US Supreme Court ruled that federally imposed school desegregation programs cannot cross school district lines, absent proof that district boundaries were drawn to promote racial segregation or that action taken by one school district caused segregation in another. In other words, Detroit suburbs could not be made to remedy harms that were the result of actions taken in Detroit. Most commentators on the case focus on this claim about the limits to cross-jurisdictional responsibility. But the court in *Milliken* also advanced an argument about the limits to responsibility for structurally produced harms. According to the majority, "The boundaries of the Detroit School District, which are coterminous with the boundaries of the city of Detroit, were established over a century ago by neutral legislation when the city was incorporated." Subsequently, "unknown and perhaps unknowable factors such as in-migration, birth rates, economic changes, or cumulative acts of private racial fears" caused Detroit and its public school system to become "predominantly Negro" (*Milliken v. Bradley* 1974, 756, n.2). Suburban districts are not responsible for de facto segregation, the court ruled, any more so than they are for de jure segregation caused by action taken in urban districts.

On first glance, this claim has intuitive appeal. How can an individual or collective agent (like an elected official or a public school district) be responsible for—and why should an agent be held responsible for—a harm produced by "unknown and perhaps unknowable factors"? But in her work on responsibility for structural injustice, Iris Marion Young

offers a compelling response. On Young's view, although people who are privileged by an inegalitarian structural context (like parents, teachers, and school administrators in suburban Detroit) may not be morally responsible, and hence may not be blameworthy for the disadvantages others endure, nevertheless they may share political responsibility to act to help change the relevant injustice, moving forward.

Young's argument is the point of departure for the present essay. It begins by engaging her work on responsibility for structural injustice, emphasizing that her argument has not just an ethical dimension but also what she calls a practical dimension. In other words, Young highlights the gap between the project of articulating a vision of what justice demands—in the case of structural racial injustice, structural change—and the project of identifying likely paths to achieving it, asking, "How can we get from here to there?" Her concern to answer this question is one of the virtues of her work. But her emphasis on "getting from here to there" by changing how people understand their responsibilities is misguided. I explain why, drawing on arguments developed by Charles Mills and others who work on what Mills calls white "epistemologies of ignorance." Their insight is that a politically significant form of ignorance, which attaches principally to positions of privilege, plays a key role in sustaining structural injustice. I make the case for an alternative path to dismantling structural injustice, one that foregrounds not ethical arguments about responsibility but disruptive politics.

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Clarissa Rile Hayward (clarissarhayward@gmail.com) teaches political theory at Washington University in St. Louis.

## RESPONSIBILITY FOR STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE

Imagine that our forebears, for reasons we no longer know, built a man-made forest traversed by some paths that are structurally sound and others that are booby-trapped. If, today, we go for very different walks—I along a safe path, you along one fraught with danger—I might not be causally, and hence I might not be morally, responsible for the harms that you suffer. Still, I might share with you, and with all who walk these paths, *political responsibility* for working to change our (socially made) environment. In such a situation, no compelling principled argument justifies my washing my hands of the obligation to help remedy the structures we inhabit.

So argues Young in a series of articles published shortly before her death and in her posthumous *Responsibility for Justice* (Young 2004, 2006a, 2006b, and 2011). In this body of work, Young distinguishes between a conventional model of moral responsibility and what she calls “political responsibility” to participate in collective action aimed at remedying structural injustice. At the heart of the distinction lies the matter of blame. If I am morally responsible for some harm—if, for instance, I caused it or helped cause it by acting in a way I ought not to have acted—then typically I am viewed as blameworthy, and I am subjected to censure. Young’s claim is that I may be responsible to redress harms that I did not cause or help cause and for which I am therefore neither morally responsible nor blameworthy.

Recall the suggestion, from the majority opinion in *Milliken v. Bradley*, that “unknown and perhaps unknowable factors such as in-migration, birth rates, economic changes, or cumulative acts of private racial fears,” even if they work together to produce racial segregation in Detroit public schools, are insufficient to warrant state-mandated inter-district remedies. The court emphasized in *Milliken* that Detroit school district boundaries were established “over a century ago” not by agents who intended to promote twentieth-century racial segregation but by “neutral legislation.” The suggestion was that the absence of intent to harm, the absence of a direct causal link between an identifiable agent’s action and a particular harm, and the putative inability to “know” that causal link absolve the relevant agents (which, in this case, include collective agents, namely, school districts in metropolitan Detroit) from responsibility.

This claim rests on a conventional understanding of moral responsibility, according to which an agent is responsible for a harm if and only if two conditions obtain: first, her action caused or helped cause that harm, and second, the relevant action was under her control. Call this the “cause + control” view. On this view, responsible agents need not be not lim-

ited to individuals; they can be collectivities, like school districts or corporations or nation-states (Feinberg 1968, French 1984). There is room for debate, what is more, about what counts as both cause and control. For example, on some accounts, I may be partly responsible for harms that I contribute to causing, even if only indirectly (Räikkö 1997). On many, I am responsible even if it is my inaction, rather than my action, that causes the relevant harm (Feinberg 1984). In addition, some moral philosophers push the envelope by arguing for an expansive understanding of what it is that I control, to include even deeply engrained attitudes, dispositions, and habits, just so long as, at some point in time, I could have acted to cultivate different deep-seated traits or to resist the inculcation of those that presently influence me (May 1992, chap. 2). At the limit, however, if I clearly do not control my action (e.g., if another agent compels me to perform it) or if my action could not by any stretch of the imagination be said to cause the harm, then I am not, and I should not be held, responsible.

Young finds fault with this conventional view, which she claims can direct attention away from efforts to change some forms of injustice, namely, those that are structural and hence difficult to analyze in ways that isolate and clearly identify agents who are cause + control responsible. The notion of structural injustice lies at the heart of her argument. She defines injustice in terms of “large groups of persons” suffering “systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities” (Young 2011, 52). Racial segregation in underfunded and underperforming public schools would be a prime example of injustice thus understood. For Young, the “structural” in structural injustice signals injustice that results from the interaction of multiple large-scale social processes, like the “in-migration, [changes in] birth rates, [and] economic changes” cited in *Milliken*. Although these processes themselves are driven by the actions of individual and collective agents, the injustices they generate are structural since none of the relevant actions can easily be isolated as a crucial cause.

Recall that, in addition to “in-migration, birth rates, [and] economic changes,” the majority in *Milliken* cited “private racial fears” as a factor contributing to racial segregation in and around Detroit. Many would object to the suggestion that racial biases are analogous to demographic shifts or large-scale economic changes in the way the opinion implies: that no one is responsible for them on the cause + control view. As noted above, some philosophers emphasize that people can exert control over, and should be held responsible for, their ingrained dispositions, beliefs, and habits. Nevertheless, Young underscores that the many agents whose actions contribute to structural injustice do not nec-

essarily act from morally blameworthy (e.g., racist) attitudes and impulses. “While some do things that are individually wrong,” she writes, “many others try to be law-abiding and decent even as they try to pursue their own interests” (Young 2011, 52).

Imagine a white, middle-class Detroit parent who does not “fear,” and does not act in a racist or otherwise biased manner toward, any subset of her fellow citizens. Imagine a parent who, other things equal, prefers to send her children to racially integrated schools, but who nevertheless moves to the suburbs and sends her children to racially exclusive schools there because the economically constrained urban system performs significantly more poorly than do its suburban counterparts. This parent contributes, no less so than does a racist parent, to the large-scale processes obliquely referenced in *Milliken*. On Young’s view, she shares responsibility with her fellow citizens to act to remedy structural racial injustice, even though she may not be blameworthy on the cause + control model. Borrowing Hannah Arendt’s terminology (Arendt 1987), Young writes that such a person is *politically responsible* to act with others to change structural processes that create unjust outcomes even though she may not be morally responsible, in the sense of liable (Young 2011, chap. 3).

Why is this parent responsible, on Young’s view? Part of her answer centers on the benefits people derive from their participation in institutions and practices that generate systematically unjust outcomes. Drawing on John Rawls’s defense of his famous claim that the “subject of justice is the basic structure of society” (Rawls 1971, 7, 96), Young also suggests that two further considerations are relevant: first, the “profound and pervasive” impact social structures have on people’s life chances, and, second, the fact that social structures define background conditions that people cannot affect directly through their choices and individual actions and yet that set the terms of their social lives (Young 2011, 64–72). Think of the decision to send one’s child to public school in suburban Detroit, or for that matter in Detroit proper. No doubt, that decision will interact with the actions of multiple other agents (other parents, state and local public officials, school administrators, local business owners, state and federal courts, etc.) to produce politically significant effects—some now, some in the distant future. But the parent making her choice cannot predict those effects. Nor can she, simply by deciding otherwise, change the background conditions that influence her action and shape the effects it helps produce.

Young, with Rawls, emphasizes that social agents benefit from coordinating and cooperating with others in processes that at once set the terms of their interaction and pro-

foundly affect their interests and opportunities. She argues, further, that if people participate in practices governed by institutions and other structures that are unjust, even if they cannot control or directly manipulate those background conditions, they can and should normatively evaluate them, analyze how they share responsibility with others for shaping and reshaping them, and act together with those others to change the relevant structures in justice-promoting ways. In her words, “It is possible, indeed even likely, that some people can rightly claim that their individual interactions with other people are impeccable, and that at the same time they contribute a great deal to the production and reproduction of structural injustice because of the social position they occupy and the actions they take within it” (Young 2011, 73). If so, she argues, they share responsibility with others who are similarly positioned to act to remediate the relevant injustices.

On Young’s view, the Detroit-area parent who moves to the suburbs and sends her child to public school there benefits from coordinating and cooperating with others in her political society in a wide range of social processes, including those through which they educate children. Social structures, including the educational systems in her state and metropolitan area, set the terms of her interaction with her fellow citizens and profoundly affect their interests and opportunities. Even if this parent is not responsible on the conventional cause + control view for generating those background conditions, she may be politically responsible for acting to help change them, going forward.

Young names her alternative to the cause + control model the “social connection” model of responsibility and underscores that “all those who contribute by their actions to structural processes with some unjust outcomes share [political] responsibility [to work to remedy] the injustice” (Young 2011, 96). Their responsibility is grounded in, not cause + control, but the benefits they derive from social participation in the relevant processes, along with obligations of reciprocity. In her words, “[Political] responsibility derives from belonging together with others in a system of interdependent processes of cooperation and competition through which we seek benefits and aim to realize projects. Within these processes, each of us expects justice toward ourselves, and others can legitimately make claims of justice on us” (Young 2011, 105).

### **MOTIVATING STRUCTURAL JUSTICE: RESPONSIBILITY AND BLAME**

It is possible to interpret a claim about responsibility—for example, an argument about whether and in what sense the Detroit-area parent is responsible for racial injustice in met-

ropolitan Detroit—as no more than a truth-claim about a set of facts that are taken to be objective. If I define responsibility as cause + control, for example, I might make what I take to be no more than an objective truth-claim (“Bobby is responsible for breaking the window”), because I understand it to follow from a set of verifiable facts (a movement of Bobby’s body caused the ball to crash through the glass, and at the moment when he made the movement, he was in control of his body). Bobby’s responsibility, I might think, is a fact about the world. It would be true whether or not I so named it. “Responsibility” is no more than a label that I attach to that fact. In a similar vein, Young might conceive responsibility in terms of the objective fact of contributing to producing structures that adversely affect others from whom one would expect and demand justice, in the context of social cooperation enabled by the relevant structures. If, in fact, the Detroit-area parent contributed to producing the relevant structures (Young might think), and if, in fact, she would expect justice toward herself were she adversely affected, then one can make an objective truth-claim that, along with the others who also contribute to producing those structures, she is responsible for helping change them.

This reading does not capture what Young is up to in her argument. Nor, for that matter, does it capture what most people are up to when they advance claims about responsibility. To see why, imagine that Bobby were to listen to my assertion that he is responsible and reply, “Fine, then I’m responsible,” grin broadly, and lob a second ball through a second window. Or imagine that the Detroit-area parent were to say, “Yes, I’d expect and demand justice from others were I adversely affected by these social structures. But I’m not. To the contrary, they advantage me. So I like the structures, and I will not lift a finger to change them!”

Young would be dissatisfied with such a response. As she underscores throughout her writing on the topic, claims about responsibility are typically intended—and she, herself, intends them—at least in part, as means to induce people to act in ways they ought to act, but otherwise might not. Young refers to this aspect of her argument as “rhetorical” and “practical” (terms she uses interchangeably) and writes that, in the case of claims about political responsibility to dismantle structural injustice, “the point is . . . for all who contribute to processes producing unjust outcomes to work to transform those processes” (Young 2011, 109, 113).

Consider, then, a very different view from the one sketched above. Perhaps claims about responsibility are nothing more than means to induce people to take some desired action(s) or to effect some desired outcome(s). Suppose, for example, I call people cause + control responsible for window breakage

whenever it is the case that the offending ball has been released from their hands, and suppose I do so for no other reason than that I want to avoid window breakage. Perhaps I believe that calling people responsible will motivate them, not just to refrain from taking actions that predictably lead to window-breaking but also to take supererogatory steps to prevent even unforeseeable and involuntary window-breaking accidents. (Perhaps, e.g., I believe calling people responsible will motivate them to avoid playing with balls altogether.) My claim is purely instrumental. It is not meant to be, and it is not understood to be, a claim about some fact or about some state of the world that is true.

This second view is not Young’s, either. Clearly, she does the work of explicating the grounds for what she calls political responsibility because she wants to convince her reader that her claims about responsibility are in some sense true. But in what sense? As I read Young, her aim is to convince her reader that her claims about responsibility are true in an ethical sense: in the sense, that is, that they follow from ethical principles and standards that the reader, as a participant in social practices that those principles and standards govern, at least implicitly accepts. I read Young as in agreement on this point with Marion Smiley (1992, especially chap. 4), who argues that judgments of responsibility on the cause + control view are always social and political, never simply objective. If I do not endorse the standards of fairness or the principles of reciprocity on which Young’s argument rests, then I will reject her claims about political responsibility. But if I do, Young’s hope is, the argument will both persuade me and motivate me to act in the ways those principles and standards define as right. More specifically, they will persuade me that I ought to act, and they will motivate me, in fact, to act to help change structural injustice.

In short, Young’s work on responsibility has both what she calls a practical and what I will call an ethical dimension. With respect to the former, she elaborates a series of critiques of what she suggests are common practical effects of the cause + control view. Responsibility on the cause + control model, she writes—that is, responsibility assigned to agents judged blameworthy for having caused harms through actions they control—can encourage defensiveness, along with efforts to deflect blame from the self and onto others (Young 2011, 110). What is more, even if those judged blameworthy do accept the blame assigned them, cause + control responsibility can still be counterproductive. It can encourage a preoccupation with the past, she writes, and with “the state of [individual agents’] souls and . . . character,” directing attention away from efforts to change extant structural injustices (Young 2011, 118). Young claims that a critical advantage of conceiving responsibility for struc-

tural injustice in the way she proposes is that it decenters blame. In her words, it is “forward-looking” rather than “backward-looking” (Young 2011, 96). It persuades by making an ethical argument about people’s future obligations, that is: a tack Young argues is practically efficacious because it does not rely on, and hence does not risk, the perverse consequences, of blame.

In her foreword to *Responsibility for Justice*, Martha Nussbaum challenges both dimensions of Young’s argument. As far as the ethical dimension is concerned, it often does make sense to blame people for their contributions (through action or inaction) to the perpetuation of unjust structures, Nussbaum claims. The line between what Young stresses is a “backward-looking” view of cause + control responsibility and the alternative she offers—“forward-looking” political responsibility—is difficult to maintain, in Nussbaum’s words, “for the simple reason that time marches on” (Nussbaum 2011, xxi). If, at time  $t$ , the hypothetical Detroit-area parent has a political responsibility to act together with others to challenge structural racial injustice, but does not so act, then at time  $t + 1$ , “she is guilty of not having shouldered her responsibility” (Nussbaum 2011, xxi). What is more, the problem is even more far-reaching than this example suggests, Nussbaum writes, since Young claims that, as a general matter, people are obligated to work to ensure that the institutions and practices in which they participate do not generate structural injustice. It thus seems that at any given time the (perhaps well-intentioned) Detroit-area parent is, to quote Nussbaum, “culpably negligent,” unless she is engaged in collective efforts with others to attempt to end structural racial injustice (Nussbaum 2011, xxi).

The critique is persuasive. Someone who endorses the standards of fairness and the principle of reciprocity that ground Young’s argument should agree that acting, or failing to act, in ways that violate those standards and principles is blameworthy. Young might respond by falling back on the practical dimension of her critique of the practice of blaming. But Nussbaum has a rejoinder. It can be efficacious to blame people, she argues, and not only when harms are directly caused by actions they control. It can be efficacious to blame people when they contribute indirectly to structural injustice. The practice of blaming—the practice of assigning blame to those who fail to discharge their responsibilities—is a psychologically powerful mechanism for motivating people to work with others to enact progressive change. If, instead of blaming in a “narrowly targeted” way, Nussbaum argues—instead, that is, of singling out those agents who are directly responsible on the cause + control view—people blame all who are complicit in perpetuating injustice, then blame might motivate collective action to re-

mediate harm (Nussbaum 2011, xxiv). Again, Nussbaum is correct. Although blaming can have perverse effects, as Young underscores, it also can have practical effects of the very sort she hopes for; that is, it can motivate conformity with ethical principles and standards. It is far from obvious that such effects cannot obtain in cases of structural injustice.

Beginning in the following section, I turn to what I argue is a more significant weakness in Young’s argument than the weaknesses on which Nussbaum focuses. My critique centers on the practical dimension of Young’s view. Before turning to my own critique, however, let me point out a possible modification to her argument that would address both of Nussbaum’s concerns. Robert Goodin (1987, 1995, 81–87, 100–113), in his work on what he calls “task-responsibility,” notes that sometimes people hold each other responsible, in the sense that they task them with (they assign them the duty of) acting to promote some desirable outcome or to remediate some harm that they did not cause. For example, members of a particular society might judge parents task-responsible for taking steps to ensure that their children are educated. Members of a democratic political society might judge citizens task-responsible for learning about the policy positions of competing candidates and the likely implications of proposed policies. Task responsibility subsumes what Young calls political responsibility, which can be understood as shared task responsibility for acting together with others to remediate harms that no individual, alone can redress. If each individual parent is task-responsible for ensuring that her child is educated, and if each individual citizen is task-responsible for learning about competing candidates and policies, the citizenry as a whole, one might think, shares task responsibility for supporting an adequate educational system and for holding elected officials accountable for their decisions and actions while in office.

Goodin’s view is compatible with Young’s then. But it departs from hers in that Goodin underscores that, although to identify an agent as task-responsible is not necessarily to blame her, people can be blamed, after the fact, if they fail to discharge their task responsibilities (Goodin 1987). His willingness to blame at time  $t + 1$  those who have failed to discharge what were their task responsibilities at time  $t$  could be used to modify Young’s account of political responsibility for structural injustice. Such a modification would answer both of the critiques Nussbaum articulates. Using Goodin’s argument to modify Young’s, one might suggest that people can share political (task) responsibility to act together to remedy structural injustice, even in the absence of wrongdoing, and that they can be held responsible, in the sense of blameworthy, if they fail to discharge that duty.

But even with that change, there remain nontrivial problems with Young's argument, and in particular with what she identifies as its practical dimension. Jade Schiff has criticized Young for "not sufficiently appreciate[ing] the depth of the [practical] problem" that she identifies, that is, the problem of motivating people to act to challenge and change structural injustice (Schiff 2014). In Schiff's words, "The problem [Young] overlook[s] is that actually assuming our responsibility for structural injustice requires that we first acknowledge and experience our implication in it" (Schiff 2014, 28). Building on this critique, I want to draw attention to significant obstacles to achieving Young's vision of dismantling structural injustice. I begin by considering what it is that motivates people to do what (they think) is right.

### DO THE RIGHT THING

Imagine you have a choice. You can recycle your soda can or you can throw it in the trash. You can walk across the parking lot and return your shopping cart to the cart corral or you can leave it near the spot where you parked. You can participate in the blood drive that your employer sponsors or you can head straight home after work, declining to participate. You can vote for a tax that you believe serves the good of your community, although by providing a service you and your family are unlikely to use, or you can vote against what you take to be the communal good, advancing your private, self-regarding interest. Imagine, further, that in each case one possible action is defined as right by ethical principles and standards you endorse, and the other as wrong.

Under what circumstances do you "do the right thing" (that is, the thing you regard to be right)? Although the list is not meant to be exhaustive, I want to suggest that at least seven considerations are relevant. To begin, an exceedingly important—indeed, an almost always necessary—condition is that you notice the need for the right action. You must have some knowledge, that is—and more than knowledge, a conscious awareness—that there is a need that should be met or a harm that should be redressed and an action you can take that will help promote (what you believe to be) a just outcome. If you do not know about the blood drive or if you are not consciously aware that there is an insufficient supply of blood to meet the needs of the injured, you are unlikely to donate.

Second and third, you are more likely to act in the way you think right if the need for right action strikes you as pressing and if you know (or at least believe) that you have a relatively strong capacity to act to (help) meet that need. Suppose your cart has begun to roll downhill toward another parked car. You are more likely to chase after it to

meet the (more pressing) need to prevent a collision than you are to return a cart you can safely nestle in a parking lot island, in order to meet the (less pressing) need for a handy supply of shopping carts near the store entrance. But suppose you know (or at least think) that the grocery store employee at the bottom of the hill is much better positioned than you to catch your runaway cart. You are that much less likely to chase after it and return it to the corral.

The second and third circumstances, notice, unlike the first, are not (almost always) necessary conditions. That said, together, the first three are sometimes sufficient. Recall Peter Singer's famous hypothetical: "If I am walking past a shallow pond," Singer (1972, 231) writes, "and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out." Would you wade in? Years of teaching Singer's article have led me to conclude that many readers reject his larger claim that people ought to donate to famine relief rather than spend money on nonnecessities like new clothing or meals prepared in restaurants. What is more, even those of my students who report that they accept this larger argument, when asked, admit they have no intention of changing their behavior in the relevant ways. Still, most find the drowning child hypothetical compelling, and when asked, most claim they would "wade in and pull the child out." Why? Not because they imagine having caused the relevant harm. Singer constructs his hypothetical so as to suggest that the passerby is not responsible on the cause + control model. They would act to save the child because they imagine the harm being significant (a life is at stake) and evident (they imagine themselves, in fact, noticing and then maintaining conscious awareness of the drowning child), and because they see themselves as relatively, indeed at first uniquely, capable of redressing it.

Singer's hypothetical also helps illustrate what I want to suggest is a fourth relevant circumstance. Immediately after introducing it, he notes that wading into the pond "will mean getting my clothes muddy" (Singer 1972, 231). Sometimes, even when your capacity to effect a just outcome does not strike you as unique, even when it does not strike you as particularly great, if the costs of doing the right thing are negligible, or at least very low, that might tip the scales.

A low cost to doing the right thing is circumstance four, then. Having formed a habit of doing the right thing is circumstance five. Note that part of the intuitive appeal of Singer's example is that it contrasts the very low cost of performing the right action (muddy clothes) with the very pressing need for someone to perform it (if no one does, a child will drown). I want to underscore, however, that even if the effect of performing the right action is relatively insignificant, people sometimes do the right thing because of

circumstances five (having formed a habit) and/or four (the right action's low cost). Consider recycling. I, personally, am persuaded by the argument that most environmental damage is done production-side: that consumers, in fact, do not help matters all that much when they recycle. What is more, I am all but certain that my individual choice to place this can in that recycling bin, rather than in the trash receptacle that sits next to it, will have no decisive impact on anything important. Still, I recycle. I do this partly from habit. I formed the habit of recycling partly because the university that employs me has lowered my costs by placing recycling bins next to every garbage can on campus.

Habit is why circumstance one (conscious awareness of the need for right action) is only "almost always," rather than strictly, necessary. You might form a habit of performing a relatively low-cost action that, upon reflection, you think is the right thing to do. You might then perform that action regularly and reflexively, that is, without consulting or making conscious your background ethical belief. For example, you might toss a can into the recycling bin at work while engaged in a conversation with a colleague that is so all-consuming that your attention does not shift even the little bit it would need to in order for you to recall the rationale for performing that particular action. You might do so on a regular basis, day in and day out. But if the cost of performing the action were suddenly to increase—if, say, your employer were to move the recycling bins to an especially inconvenient location—then you would need some conscious awareness of the need for the action to renew your commitment to perform it.

The sixth and seventh circumstances center, respectively, on extrinsic and intrinsic motivations to do the right thing. Sometimes when the costs to performing a right action are nonnegligible, even high, people do it anyway, because (circumstance six) they receive some benefit or, what amounts to the same, avoid some sanction, which they experience as counterbalancing the costs. Sometimes (circumstance seven) they do it simply because they believe it is the right thing to do.

Notice that the seven circumstances consist in one (almost always) necessary condition and three pairs of conditions that, (almost always) in combination with the first, are sometimes sufficient. Of the seven, I want to underscore, circumstances one and five are the most important. Circumstance one, conscious awareness of the need to act to promote some just outcome, is necessary, except in those cases in which (circumstance five) an agent has formed a relatively stable habit of doing the right thing.

Notice also that the first pair of sometimes sufficient circumstances (numbers two and three) do not obtain for

most cases of structural injustice. As Young argues, one of the biggest challenges when it comes to eradicating structural injustice is that individual agents are not, and do not experience themselves as, well positioned to act to change it. Even if the Detroit-area parent sees the need to challenge structural inequalities in education as pressing, the set of options she faces in deciding how to act is highly circumscribed. She can remain in the city, where the tax base is weak and the schools and other public services are failing, or she can move to one of the city's better-off suburbs, taking her tax dollars with her and thus exacerbating the problem. What she cannot do is alter her choice set, at least not on her own. It is for this reason that Young would urge her to deliberate with others in metropolitan Detroit and to exercise her democratic rights in ways aimed at changing the structure of urban and suburban schooling. But what should she do in the mean time? Stay in the city? Move to the suburbs? A moral philosopher who adopts a cause + control approach to theorizing responsibility might suggest that she prioritize her parental responsibilities, on the grounds that she is relatively well positioned to exert control over the quality of the education her child receives but poorly positioned to control the larger structural context. Young, rightly dissatisfied with such a view, would highlight the parent's political responsibility to work with others to shape an outcome that, as an individual, she remains poorly positioned to effect.

Nor is it the case, for most problems of structural injustice, that the second pair of sometimes sufficient circumstances (numbers four and five) obtains. As far as habit is concerned, the trouble is that it usually pushes in the exact wrong direction. In Young's words: "Most of us contribute . . . to the production and reproduction of structural injustice precisely because we follow the accepted and expected rules and conventions of the communities and institutions in which we act. Usually we enact these conventions and practices *in a habitual way*, without explicit reflection and deliberation on what we are doing, having in the foreground of our consciousness and intention immediate goals we want to achieve and the particular people we need to interact with to achieve them" (Young 2004, 378; emphasis added). Unlike the habitual recycler, who does the right thing when acting reflexively, the urban dweller who acts from habit as she pursues immediate goals (like the goal of ensuring her child's educational success) fails to challenge, indeed often helps reinscribe, structural injustice.

Nor does the cost of doing the right thing typically seem low to those who are affected by structural injustice—least of all, to those whom structural injustice systematically advantages, who are often the people best positioned to act to

change it. To be sure, Singer's utilitarian point is well taken: the privileged often have less to lose from eliminating injustice than the disadvantaged have to gain. But what matters most in terms of motivation is how the relevant cost is perceived by the agent(s) who must decide to bear it. Perhaps one of the reasons Singer loses so many readers—perhaps the main reason he has yet to convince even one of my students to alter her behavior—is that, although not buying unneeded clothing or not eating in restaurants is trivial compared with the harm of starving, these choices represent a lifestyle change that the typical privileged person perceives as costly.

It is likely because circumstances two through five do not obtain in most cases of structural injustice that Young focuses on circumstance seven: encouraging an intrinsic motivation to do the right thing. Persuading people that ethical principles and standards they accept make them politically responsible to act to change structural injustice, her idea is, will motivate them to act in the way they understand to be right. Nussbaum, by contrast, focuses on a subset of the extrinsic motivations associated with circumstance six, namely, the desire to win praise and/or avoid blame by doing what is socially understood to be right. The modified version of Young's argument sketched at the end of the previous section suggests that changing how people understand their shared task responsibilities will induce them to do the right thing by changing both their intrinsic and their extrinsic motivations.

But if the argument in the present section is correct, even that may not be enough. If I am right that circumstance one—conscious awareness of the need to act to promote some just outcome—is necessary, except in cases in which people habitually do the right thing, then those concerned with questions of structural injustice should devote considerable attention to the matter of how to engender such conscious awareness.

### EPISTEMOLOGIES OF IGNORANCE

Near the start of his celebrated *Do the Right Thing*, Spike Lee introduces what will become an important conflict driving the film's plot (Lee 1989). A character named Buggin' Out (described by one critic as "a pseudo-black nationalist who sports an African pendant around his neck but still wears stylish, unlaced Air Jordan basketball shoes" [Reid 1997, 9]) confronts Sal, the Italian American owner of Sal's Famous Pizzeria, about the fact that the "Wall of Fame" at Sal's does not include a single black American. The Wall of Fame displays signed photographs of Joe DiMaggio, Frank Sinatra, Luciano Pavarotti, Liza Minelli, Mario Cuomo, and other famous Italian Americans. When Buggin' Out asks

Sal . . . "How come you ain't got no brothers up here on the wall?" Sal replies: "You want brothers up on the Wall of Fame, you should open up your own business. Then you can do what you wanna do. My pizzeria, Italian Americans up on the wall" (Lee 1989).

Buggin' Out responds by pointing out that the pizzeria, which is located in the majority-black Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, is supported financially by its African American clientele, whom he asserts should therefore "have some say" in who is represented on the wall: "Sal, that might be fine, you own this, but rarely do I see any Italian Americans eating in here. All I've ever seen is black folks. So since we spend so much money here, we do have some say" (Lee 1989).

Buggin' Out demands that Sal add photos of Malcolm X, Angela Davis, and Michael Jordan to the Wall of Fame. Sal responds by emerging from behind the counter with a baseball bat: a symbol, not just of "America's game" but also of the brutal killing of Michael Griffith in Howard Beach, Queens just two and a half years before *Do the Right Thing's* release, a high-profile incident of racial violence that would have been prominent in Lee's viewers' minds.

Sal threatens Buggin' Out, then, with an act of physical violence that is racially charged. At the same time, the context of their conflict is one of what Young would call structural racial injustice. Sal's Famous Pizzeria is a white-owned business in a majority-black neighborhood, from which the owner profits but in which he does not live. This pattern is a familiar one, since—Sal's speech notwithstanding—it is no easy feat for most people of color to "open [their] own business" due to well-documented racial discrimination in lending, combined with significant racial wealth differentials, which themselves are the product of racial discrimination (Blanchflower, Levine, and Zimmerman 2003; Oliver and Shapiro 2006). In his exchange with Buggin' Out, Sal implies that the United States is a colorblind meritocracy: a place where each individual can "do what [he wants to] do" if only he works hard and invests wisely. What he fails to acknowledge is America's long history of racial oppression, a history that has granted those constructed as white—a group that, by the late twentieth century, included Italian Americans—advantages denied most American blacks.

To recall the language of the previous section, Sal exhibits no conscious awareness of structural racism, and hence, necessarily, no conscious awareness of the need to act to help remediate it. To the contrary, and despite the fact that Sal strongly identifies as Italian American, his worldview is strikingly individualistic. He, and he alone, should determine who is represented on the pizzeria's Wall of Fame, his claim is. This right derives from his success in a fair and open market,



a success he and he alone has earned and that he therefore deserves.

Why does Sal lack conscious awareness of structural racism? A compelling answer, I want to suggest, can be drawn from the work of Charles Mills and others who write on what Mills calls white “epistemologies of ignorance” (Mills 1997, 1999, 2007). For Mills, white ignorance is a form of ignorance in the dictionary sense of that word; it is a “want of knowledge (general or special)” (*Oxford English Dictionary* [1989]). White ignorance can involve not knowing something that is true. It can involve believing something to be false that is true or something true that is false. Mills gives this example from “the classic period of European expansionism”:

It . . . becomes possible to speak with no sense of absurdity of “empty” lands that are actually teeming with millions of people, of “discovering” countries whose inhabitants already exist. . . . Even seemingly straightforward empirical perception will be affected—the myth of a nation of hunters in contradiction to widespread Native American agriculture that saved the English colonists’ lives, the myth of stateless savages in contradiction to forms of government from which the white Founders arguably learned, the myth of a pristine wilderness in contradiction to a humanized landscape transformed by thousands of years of labor. (Mills 2007, 27)

The English colonist might, in principle, know that people inhabit and cultivate the land in America, just as Sal might, in principle, know that white and black Americans do not have equal opportunities to “open up [their] own business[es],” earn profits, and enjoy the workplace autonomy that comes with being an entrepreneur. On the face of it, then, it might seem there is a straightforward fix: the way to clear up people’s ignorance is simply to give them the facts. Show Sal the audit data that reveals racial bias in business lending or point out the cultivated fields to the confused colonist. But “white ignorance” is a larger problem than this apparent solution suggests. Not reducible to an objective difficulty in seeing or knowing, it is a social and a structural phenomenon: a failure to see and to know that can be motivated, even when not fully conscious, and that is often resilient in the face of evidence and reason. Thus, Mills writes of “*an ignorance that resists . . . an ignorance that fights back . . . an ignorance that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly*” (Mills 2007, 13; emphasis as in original).

Young, recall, emphasizes the limits to what any individual (such as the hypothetical Detroit-area parent) can do

to challenge those forms of injustice that are structural. Mills’s insight is that, very often, an additional barrier stands in the way. On his view, the Detroit-area parent is likely different from Singer’s passer-by, not only in her lesser capacity to act directly to remediate the relevant harm but also in her ignorance of that harm, and hence of the very need for her (or for anyone) to act.

To be sure, every person is ignorant of innumerable things. I know almost nothing about how my car’s engine works. I do not know what the weather will be two weeks from tomorrow, and I do not know the GNP of Argentina. Some of what I do not know, I do not know because I trust others (my mechanic, for instance) to know it for me. Some of what I do not know, I do not know because it lies beyond the current limits of human knowledge. (I am fairly sure nobody knows what the weather will be two weeks from tomorrow.) Some of what I do not know (like Argentina’s GNP), I do not know simply because, given limits to my time, energy, and attention, I have chosen not to learn about it.

But the forms of ignorance at issue here are different. They attach specifically to positions of social dominance. (Thus, there is a male ignorance, as well, an able-bodied ignorance, a cisgendered ignorance, etc.) The mechanisms of their production include information gate-keeping by powerfully positioned members of dominant groups, dominant background beliefs and assumptions, which many individuals, especially (but not only) members of dominant groups internalize, and the psychological investment that privileged people have in maintaining a sense of the self as ethical, even as they enjoy systematic unearned advantage.

As far as the first mechanism (gate-keeping) is concerned, consider the Texas State Board of Education and its pervasive influence over what American citizens do and do not learn in school. Even the conservative Thomas B. Fordham Institute has criticized the Texas board for producing social studies texts that “[distort] or [suppress] less triumphal . . . aspects of our past,” such as the history and politics of racial injustice in this country (quoted in Collins 2012). If I am a white person who grew up learning social studies from textbooks shaped by the Texas standards—as most American textbooks are—I likely know little of that history. What is more, and unlike what I do not know about my car engine, the weather, and Argentina’s GNP, I might not even know that I do not know, making ignorance that takes this form “difficult to identify without hindsight” (Tuana 2006, 6).

What if I were exposed to some new source of information that challenged my ignorance about racial injustice in America? What if I read a more accurate history text, for

example, one that detailed the ways racial oppression was produced and is maintained in my society? The second mechanism—my own internalized beliefs and assumptions—might help maintain my ignorance. As Mills argues, the cognitive tools people use to interpret the data that comprise their experiences of the world—the background beliefs and the conceptual grid through which they perceive and make sense of what they see, hear, and read—themselves are social products, which are shaped by prevailing relations of power. “What cognitive psychology has revealed is that rather than continually challenging conceptual adequacy by the test of disconfirming empirical data, we tend to do the opposite—to interpret the data through the grid of the concepts in such a way that seemingly disconfirming, or at least problematic, perceptions are filtered out or marginalized” (Mills 2007, 25). Thus, Mills writes, a concept like “savage” “orient[s] us to the world” (Mills 2007, 27). It enables us to not see, and thus not know even readily evident truths, “since it is not a matter of seeing [phenomena] with the concept discretely attached but rather of seeing things *through* the concept itself” (Mills 2007, 27). For a contemporary example, think of a concept like “thug.” “Thug” orients those who think with it, and through it, making possible their perception of an unarmed black youth as older than he is, as bigger than he is, and as likely armed: in short, as a threat.

The third mechanism, much discussed in feminist standpoint theory (on which Mills draws in elaborating his view) is the investment privileged people have in maintaining an understanding of the self as a good person—as someone who behaves ethically, someone who does the right thing—even while enjoying the benefits that attach to positions of social dominance under conditions of structural inequality. Sandra Harding (1991; see also Alcoff 2007) emphasizes that members of privileged groups are more affected by this mechanism than are the oppressed, both because navigating an unjust world demands of the oppressed that they see it more or less clearly and because, unlike the privileged, the oppressed need not deny structural injustice in order to see themselves as good people. The hypothetical Detroit-area parent enjoys unearned advantages, due to her social-structural position. For her, not knowing—and, crucially, not knowing that she does not know—has a certain utility. Not so the black parent for whom “white flight” is not an option. Those denied equal opportunities for social mobility and success get no psychological benefit from imagining the American Dream to be reality.

But Sal does. If anyone can “open up [his] own business” and “do what [he wants] to do,” but not everyone has, then Sal is particularly praiseworthy. If the United States is a colorblind meritocracy, and if Sal’s successes are fairly won,

then he is also blameless. He owes nothing to Buggin’ Out or to any of the black customers who enable his pizzeria’s success. To the contrary, he is fully within his rights to ignore their claims. Granted, Sal, like all of Lee’s characters in *Do The Right Thing*, is an archetype: a working-class “white ethnic” racist who responds to a verbal challenge by charging at his unarmed black customer with a bat. Mills’s insight, however, is that Sal’s way of seeing and knowing is one that guides and governs not just avowed racists but some substantial subset of the racially privileged: people who are blind to racial injustice, not because they cannot see, so much as because they will not see. Racial injustice benefits them, and ignorance is comfortable.

### DISRUPTING IGNORANCE

Building on this insight, I want to suggest in this final section that a promising answer to Young’s question—“How can we get from here to there?”—is one that foregrounds disruptive politics. By “disruptive politics,” I mean boycotts, mass protests, sit-ins, die-ins, and other forms of unruly political action of the sort associated with the mid-century Civil Rights Movement and with the more recent Occupy movement, the Fight for 15 minimum wage campaign, and the Hands Up Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests that began when white police officer Darren Wilson fatally shot unarmed black teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Frances Fox Piven (2006, 23) defines political disruption as “withdrawing cooperation in social relations.” Here my aim is to highlight the link between such withdrawal of social cooperation and the suspension of what Charles Mills calls epistemologies of ignorance.

In March, 2014, five months before the fatal shooting of Michael Brown, 57% of white Americans agreed with the statement, “Our country has made the changes needed to give blacks equal rights with whites” (Pew Research Center 2015). One year later, just 40% of white Americans agreed. A majority—53%, compared with 36%, 38%, and 39% in 2009, 2011, and 2014—agreed that “Our country needs to continue making changes to give blacks equal rights with whites” (Pew Research Center 2015). To be sure, data like these do not support simple causal claims along the lines of “Black Lives Matter protests changed white public opinion,” since multiple variables, in addition to BLM actions, were in play. These include media coverage of both the protests and the events that triggered the protests (i.e., of specific incidents of state violence against blacks). They include public discourse, including discourse conducted through social media. That said, an important part of what happened in the wake of the 2015 events in Ferguson and other cities is that disruptive politics, broadly conceived—mass protests,

die-ins, highway shut-downs, and the like—worked both directly and indirectly (e.g., through traditional and social media) to disturb the forms of ignorance to which Mills draws attention.

Disruptive politics are not a matter of moral suasion. Their aim is less to convince those who are systematically advantaged by structural injustice that they ought to “do the right thing” than to make it all but impossible for the privileged to not hear the voices of, to not know the political claims of, the oppressed. Ferguson protesters, for example, interrupted state legislative and other political meetings, chanting “Hands up, don’t shoot!” and similar slogans; forced the temporary closure of roads and airports and of retail establishments, such as local Walmart stores; and interrupted church services, holiday celebrations, and even restaurant brunches in gentrified neighborhoods. If a conscious awareness of the need to act is an almost always necessary condition for people to “do the right thing,” and if there exists a white ignorance “that refuses to go quietly,” such acts of political disruption are critically important.

That said, I want to underscore that disruptive politics disturb epistemologies of ignorance only partially and that even that partial achievement is impermanent. I noted above that, in July 2015, 40% of white Americans agreed with the statement “Our country has made the changes needed to give blacks equal rights with whites.” But the corresponding figure for black Americans was just 8% (Pew Research Center 2015). Similarly, while 53% of whites agreed that “Our country needs to continue making changes to give blacks equal rights with whites,” a full 86% of blacks agreed with this statement (Pew Research Center 2015). Even after the politically powerful BLM actions of 2015, there remains an enormous racial divide in the perception of whether the United States has achieved justice. One reason is that disruptive politics do a better job challenging the first mechanism sketched in the previous section (information gate-keeping) than the second (internalized dominant background beliefs). By March 2015, it may have been difficult for white Americans to remain entirely ignorant of the Ferguson protesters’ claims. But they still could—and many did—view those claims through the lens of racialized concepts like “thug.”

Still, some people whose ignorance is challenged by political disruption reach a tipping point. The third mechanism sketched in the previous section—the desire to see the self as an ethical person even while enjoying unearned privilege—sometimes interacts with the loss of ignorance to produce a shift in disposition. The third mechanism, recall, works best when it is the case not only that a person does not know but also that she does not know that she does not

know. Political disruption can upset this equilibrium, and in so doing, it can push even (some) privileged people to abandon their passive acceptance of an unjust status quo. Hence, when, in the aftermath of the Michael Brown shooting, protesters made it all but impossible to not know about racial injustice and to not know one did not know, majority opinion shifted. Between 2014 and 2015, for Americans as a whole, not broken down by race, the percentage who agreed that “Our country needs to continue making changes to give blacks equal rights with whites” moved from a minority, 46%, to a solid majority, 59% (Pew Research Center 2015).

Political disruption’s achievements can be significant, then. But they are partial. They are also impermanent. I am sufficiently convinced by Mills’s work as to be pessimistic about the possibility of eliminating, once and for all, the forms of ignorance he explores. Instead, I take them to be a perennial feature of human social relations and hence of the political landscape: one to which those who aim to dismantle structural injustice must always attend.

So, how can we get from here to there? By exploiting those shifts in public discourse and public opinion that disruptive politics (sometimes) create in order to institutionalize structural change. One possible path is through sympathetic actors, who are positioned to enact change and whom the discursive shift enables politically. An example is the US Department of Justice (DOJ), which in April 2016, entered a consent decree with Ferguson, implementing major revisions to the city’s municipal code, police policies and practices, and municipal court policies and procedures, changes that, when in place, should make real progress toward dismantling structural injustice in Ferguson (*United States vs. City of Ferguson* 2016). But a more common path is through reluctant actors, whom the discursive shift constrains politically. As Piven (2006) argues, changes to public discourse of the sort witnessed in 2015 can undermine leaders’ and would-be leaders’ capacities to construct democratic majorities. When they do, one possible response is political change aimed at placating those voters who threaten to defect. Think of the two main contenders for the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination, Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, who, following multiple exchanges with BLM activists, unveiled comprehensive racial justice platforms.

Should the reforms recommended by the Democratic candidates be enacted, or for that matter should the Ferguson reforms mandated by the consent decree be enacted, an immediate result would be a significant change to the incentive structure for other political agents. A case in point is police officers in Ferguson. The Department of Justice’s 2015 report on the city made it clear that, to that point,

Ferguson police recruitment, hiring, training, and evaluation had emphasized revenue generation through the issuance of citations and arrests (US Department of Justice 2015). The consent decree mandates important changes to these practices. In addition, it significantly increases officer accountability. It thus alters the calculus for police officers on the ground. In the third section of this essay, I noted that Martha Nussbaum emphasizes a subset of the extrinsic motivations that can prompt a person to behave in ways that are socially defined to be right, namely, the desire to win praise and/or avoid blame. Here extrinsic motivation will be in play, as well, although extrinsic motivation that involves not just praise and blame but also material incentives like jobs, promotions, and salaries.

If these reforms are effectively institutionalized in Ferguson, an additional, medium- to long-term result will likely be a shift at the level of habit. Recall that, of the many reasons people sometimes “do the right thing,” habit is among the most important. Habit is different from the other circumstances in that it is reflexive; it does not require regular conscious thought and decision on the part of the relevant agent. To the contrary, habit can be formed and maintained by a favorable incentive structure, as when I habitually recycle because it is nearly costless to do so, or for that matter, as when a police officer habitually engages in racial profiling because it is nearly costless to do so. Change the incentive structure, and you can change the habit. The new habit then might be preserved even without conscious decision on the part of the relevant agent—indeed, even absent any of the other circumstances sketched in the third section of this essay. One can imagine police officers in Ferguson beginning to “do the right thing” (beginning to perform their jobs in ways that enhance rather than undermine public safety) not from an intrinsic motivation to act rightly but from habit, as engendered and sustained by workplace practices and systems of evaluation and accountability that incentivize right action.

Moral suasion in the form of claims about what people ought to do and arguments about the content of their responsibilities is rarely sufficient to induce structural change. Think of the abolition of slavery in Europe and the Americas, which Elizabeth Anderson has rightly called a “stunning transformation of moral consciousness . . . perhaps the most profound instance of moral progress the world has ever seen” (Anderson 2014, 2). This change was the product of not “pure moral argument” but contentious politics, from slave revolts to organized boycotts of the sugar that was grown with slave labor (Anderson 2014, 9). Similarly, in Belgium, in the late nineteenth century, it was not reasoned arguments about democratic equality and the obliga-

tions of citizens and rulers but “regionally- and nationally-coordinated general strikes” that impelled the expansion of the franchise (Tilly and Wood 2013, 3). And in the postwar United States, not principled moral arguments but lunch counter sit-ins, bus boycotts, and urban riots were key to advancing civil rights legislation. In short, when structural change is enacted, it is not only, and it is not principally, because privileged people are made to understand their responsibilities in ways that align with the ethical principles they endorse. Instead, in significant part, it is because those whom injustice harms engage in political disruption, one important product of which is the interruption of motivated ignorance.

## CONCLUSION

The majority in *Milliken* made the case that political actors are not responsible for, and that they should not be held responsible for, harms that are structurally induced. One of the strengths of Iris Marion Young’s work is that it pushes against this conventional view of responsibility’s limits, making the case that political agents share responsibility to work to change the institutions and practices in which they participate if those institutions and practices generate systematically unjust outcomes. In addition, Young usefully draws attention to the psychological desire to see the self as an ethical person: an emphasis that drives her move away from what she calls a “backward-looking” cause + control understanding of responsibility toward a “forward-looking” view that aims to persuade the privileged to assume political responsibility for structural change. What Young misses, I have argued, is that this desire to see the self as ethical is accompanied by an equally powerful desire to avoid relinquishing systematic advantage.

In an ideal world, it would be the privileged who bore the burden of working to challenge and to change structural injustice. For example, it would be the white, middle-class, Detroit-area parent and her neighbors and their elected representatives who acted collectively to dismantle structural racial injustice in metropolitan Detroit. This division of labor would be ideal, not only because the privileged benefit the most from unjust institutions and practices, and so ought to bear the burden of working to change them, but also because they are typically best positioned to enact structural change. However, Charles Mills draws attention to an important reason why the privileged often will not bear this burden and thus to a hole in (the practical dimension of) Young’s argument.

The alternative to Young’s view that I have presented in this article highlights not the moral reasoning of the privileged but instead the political power of the oppressed. I have

argued that the structurally advantaged rarely achieve and maintain conscious awareness of structurally induced harms or of the need for political action to remediate them. Hence, the critical importance of disruptive politics, which can interrupt motivated ignorance, creating political openings for structural change.

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