

TWO APPROACHES TO SOCIAL AND STRUCTURAL SIN—SELECTED
SESSION

Topic:	Two Approaches to Social and Structural Sin
Convener:	Bradford E. Hinze, Fordham University
Moderator:	Bradford E. Hinze, Fordham University
Presenters:	Bryan Massingale, Fordham University Daniel Finn, College of St. Benedict / St. John's University
Respondent:	Jeremy Cruz, St. John's University, N.Y.

This session explored two contrasting approaches to social and structural sin. Bryan Massingale offered a cultural analysis of the evil of white supremacy to supplement a treatment of the social sin of racism. He has previously written “effective moral analysis and action require understanding racism as a culture of white advantage, privilege, and dominance that has derivative personal, interpersonal, and institutional manifestations.” This position draws on Bernard Lonergan’s view of culture as a “set of meanings and values that inform a people’s way of life.” For Massingale “culture is more fundamental and foundational than the social,” like the soul is to the body so biases, values, and symbols “define a person’s identity and inform their common way of life.” Noel Cazevane’s book on the killing of African Americans by police and vigilantes offers instances of a culture of white supremacy. Social sin is a symptom of a deeper problem called cultural sin or cultural evil, identified as white supremacy and white nationalism following Malcolm X, James Baldwin, Charles Mills, and Ta-Nehisi Coates. This cultural sin is the trait of “ignorance of or insensitivity to moral truth.” In the words of Baldwin, “my country and my countrymen. . . have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and *do not know it and do not want to know it.*” This aggressive distortion of knowledge, an epistemic distortion, cannot be overcome through education or dialogue.

Massingale identifies “three effects or impacts of such culturally-induced epistemic blindness, namely, incorrect judgments and assessments of moral situations; affective numbness or callousness to the plight of nonwhite peoples; and a refusal to acknowledge the impact of the past for present-day harms.” To defy this ignorance, Catholic theological ethics must rethink ethical responsibility and moral culpability; interrogate the power of culture undergirding this ignorance; and develop a new approach to conscience formation.

Dan Finn explores “Moral Agency within Sinful Social Structures” using a critical realist sociology. “How does the power of social structures alter our decisions?” Sociology recognizes three options: collective or structural determinism, individualism, and the approach of critical realism. The latter distinguishes persons as moral agents, and structures as sources of causal impact based on their impact on free choice. Critical realist Douglas Porpora proposes, “a social structure is a system of human relationships among (pre-existing) social positions” by means of incentives that are either restrictions or opportunities, offering constrains or enticements, which may cultivate good habits.

Racism acts as cultural and can be based on explicit convictions about racial inferiority or by unconscious racial motivations and people “act out of a cultural frame in ‘preconscious ways.’” But structures influence people of color differently than white people: more restrictions, fewer opportunities. “This is often not the personal

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preference of the persons in the position that present the restrictions and opportunities.” In hiring there can be structural issues and not simply cultural that influence decision makers. “The power of powerful persons is largely due to the power generated by the social structure in which that person holds a position.” A procedure is needed to negotiate this within different subgroups: “What are the restrictions and opportunities facing people in your subgroup?” Privilege may be justifiable; restrictions may be warranted. Or not.” To foster a more just world requires not only “properly structured organizations,” nor only “cultural change and virtuous people. . . The moral challenge is to line up the restrictions and opportunities with our values.”

Jeremy Cruz began with a general question “What is the relationship between not being seen, or misrepresented, or visually monitored by those in positions of coercive or compulsive force. . . and *systems* of oppressive violence, extraction, immobilization, disparity, and unwarranted exclusion?” Massingale’s position seems idealist. “Social structures will not change until “culture” is changed. Although not an absolute *material determinist*, Finn seems to restrain the possibility of free human choices. He offers “a way of understanding how distributions of wealth and decision-making power might influence human decision-making.”

Cruz asks Massingale: “What is at stake in constructing *culture* as “primary” or “deeper” or “foundational” to racism, rather than as “constitutive” or “essential” to racism? Cruz is “concerned that [Finn’s] . . . neutral description of power as a set of “restrictions” and “opportunities” that shape the decisions of “free agents” describes consumer choices in marketplaces better than it addresses the suffering caused by white supremacy.” Perhaps the decolonial approach of Aníbal Quijano would provide a fuller description of sinful power in matters of race and U.S. economics.

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