THEOLOGICAL Studies

Article

What Is a Sinful Social Structure?

Theological Studies
2016, Vol. 77(1) 136–164

DOI: 10.1177/0040563915619981
tsj.sagepub.com
SAGE

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Abstract
Catholic social teaching has long affirmed the existence of sinful social structures but without describing them or how they operate. This article reviews magisterial teaching on sinful social structures and turns to critical realist sociology for an analysis of structures as having causal influence through the free choices of persons within them. Theologically, social structures (whether markets or parishes) can be "sinful" in an analogous sense, similar to original sin. A typology of inclusive and extractive economic institutions exemplifies how this analysis can apply to sinful social structures today.

Keywords
Catholic social teaching, critical realism, critical realist sociology, emergence, extractive institutions, freedom, original sin, sinful social structure, social sin

> The Church's wisdom has always pointed to the presence of original sin in social conditions and in the structure of society.
>
> *Caritas in veritate* 34[1]

I am indebted to David Cloutier, Douglas Porpora, Daniel Daly, Michael Vertin, and three anonymous TS reviewers for their helpful advice on this article.

1. Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate* (2009) 34, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html. (All URLs cited herein were accessed November 4, 2015.)

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With this terse assertion that original sin affects not only persons but social structures as well, Pope Benedict XVI endorsed and deepened the decades-long papal teaching on sinful social structures. Although he did not address them as frequently as Pope John Paul II,[2] and did not clarify just what a sinful social structure is or how one functions, his associating original sin with social structures provides a helpful theological clue to how structures can be considered to be sinful.

Discussing a closely related issue, Pope John Paul II had earlier condemned "social sins which cry to heaven because they generate violence, disrupt peace and harmony between communities within single nations, between nations and between the different regions of the continent." He cited "the drug trade, the recycling of illicit funds, corruption at every level, the terror of violence, the arms race, racial discrimination, inequality between social groups and the irrational destruction of nature."[3]

The notions of social sin and sinful social structures entered the vocabulary of the universal church largely due to their role in the liberation theology and in the documents of the Latin American bishops at Medellín and Puebla. Yet, once more widely employed, social sin became frustratingly multivalent, and theological explanations have ranged from observing that every sin has social implications[4] to a sense that society itself can sin.[5] Those who reject the whole notion of social sin argue that sin requires a sinner, a conscious agent, and thus there is no social sin other than sin committed by individual persons, unless one uses the word "sin" analogically.[6]

Theologians who endorse the notion of social sin typically tie it closely to the idea of sinful social structures, sometimes similar to a comment of Pope John Paul II,[7] referring to the two together as if they formed a single concept.[8] Ignacio Ellacuría argues that

2. For a view of Pope Benedict's treatment of sinful social structures, see Daniel J. Daly, "Structures of Virtue and Vice," *New Blackfriars* 92 (2011) 341–57, at 350–52.
3. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America* 56, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_22011999_ecclesia-in-america.html.
4. John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* 15, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html.
5. Christine Gudorf argues that "human collectivities should be understood to incur both responsibility and guilt," and as evidence of support points to Elie Wiesel's insistence that the German people should be held responsible for the Holocaust. See "Admonishing Sinners: Owning Structural Sin," in *Rethinking the Spiritual Works of Mercy*, ed. Francis A. Eigo, O.S.A. (Villanova, PA: Villanova, 1993) 1–29, at 8.
6. Margaret Pfeil notes that interventions at Vatican II explicitly called for avoiding the idea of social sin because it would undermine a sense of personal responsibility. See "Doctrinal Implications of Magisterial Use of the Language of Social Sin," *Louvain Studies* 27 (2002) 132–52, at 134.
7. John Paul II, *Ut unum sint* 34, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint.html.
8. Gregory Baum has spoken explicitly of "the theological concept of 'social sin' or 'structures of sin.'" See "Structures of Sin," in *The Logic of Solidarity: Commentaries on Pope John Paul II's Encyclical on Social Concern*, ed. Gregory Baum and Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989) 110.

> to think that sin exists only when and in so far as there is personal responsibility is a mistaken and dangerous devaluation of the dominion of sin. The theology of liberation encourages people to change specific structures and to seek new ones, because it sees sin in some and grace in others.[9]

In defense of the concept of social sin, José Ignacio González Faus has argued that rejecting social sin because there is not a single conscious person making the decision would require rejecting the notion of original sin for the same reason, an unthinkable option for Catholic theology.[10]

As even this brief summary outlines, it is exceedingly difficult to present a rationally coherent explanation of social sin.

Things are quite different with the idea of sinful social structures. Of course, structures are not conscious agents and thus don't sin. But the adjectival form "sinful" performs a helpful task, as does the word "evil" in phrases such as "an evil plan." And yet Catholic social thought has no coherent account of what a social structure is, presumably a prerequisite for considering what it means to apply the descriptor "sinful" to one. This article sets out to accomplish both these goals.

I will begin with a review of recent magisterial teaching on social structures and related commentary from theologians, articulate four theological criteria for employing social science within theology, and then conclude that, among the options within sociology, critical realism provides the most adequate approach to understanding social structures. Following a brief review of the character of critical realism as a view of science more generally, I will outline the understanding of critical realist sociologists that social structures emerge from the activity of individuals, yet have independent causal impact on people through the way structures affect the (free but constrained) choices persons make. Finally, I explore the meaning of "sinful" as applied to social structures, employing both theological insights into original sin as a precondition for human choice as well as the social scientific typology of inclusive and extractive institutions. The aim is to understand more adequately the way that structures can make sinful outcomes more likely.

Due to the limits of space, this analysis will largely ignore the second major concern of sociologists that in the end must accompany a treatment of structure: culture. Where structure is largely a matter of objective relationships, often independent of what people think of them, culture is the sum total of what people think, say, and create.[11]

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9. Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Historicity of Christian Salvation," in Mysterium Liberationis: *Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993) 251–89, at 275.
10. José Ignacio González Faus, "Sin," in *Mysterium Liberationis* 532–42, at 537.
11. As sociologist Douglas Porpora puts it, "structure refers to social organizational relations . . . [while] culture refers to . . . anything with meaningful content produced by social intentionality." See *Reconstructing Sociology: The Critical Realist Approach* (New York: Cambridge University, forthcoming) ch. 6, "What and Where is Culture?" Porpora relies here on Margaret Archer, *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1988).

The Magisterial Account

What is a Social Structure?

> Man . . . is also conditioned by the social structure in which he lives, by the education he has received and by his environment. These elements can either help or hinder his living in accordance with the truth.
>
> John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*[12]

> Structures . . . are the sets of institutions and practices which people find already existing or which they create, on the national and international level, and which orientate or organize economic, social and political life.
>
> Joseph Ratzinger, *Second Instruction on Liberation Theology*[13]

Recent magisterial teaching has readily acknowledged the existence of sinful structures, typically assuming that these exist at a very general level: the structure of a national government, the economy, and society at large. Sinful structures have a debilitating influence on persons and groups, with "structures of sin" even "enwrapping" family life.[14] As Kristin Heyer has observed, the post-Vatican II appreciation of biblical sources in Catholic theology, and the awareness that biblical sin is often better understood as a condition more than an act, led magisterial teaching to recognize that the category of sin somehow needed to be extended beyond individual acts. Addressing the sinfulness of structures was an important way to do this.[15]

Where Do Social Structures Come From?

> It is not out of place to speak of "structures of sin," which . . . are rooted in personal sin, and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove.
>
> John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*[16]

> However, they [structures] always depend on the responsibility of man, who can alter them, and not upon an alleged determinism of history.
>
> Joseph Ratzinger, *Second Instruction on Liberation Theology*[17]

12. John Paul II, *Centesimus annus* 38, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html.
13. Joseph Ratzinger, "Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation" (March 22, 1986) 74, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19860322_freedom-liberation_en.html. This second instruction on liberation theology followed a first instruction, published in 1984, entitled, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'" and available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html.
14. John Paul II, "Responsible for One Another," Address at the Basilica of Our Lady of Zapopan, Guadalajara, Mexico, 30 January, 1979, *L'Osservatore Romano* (February 19, 1979) 3. Cited in Pfeil, "Doctrinal Implications" 137.
15. Kristin Heyer, "Social Sin and Immigration: Good Fences Make Bad Neighbors," *Theological Studies* 71 (2010) 410–36, at 410.
16. John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* 36, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html.
17. Joseph Ratzinger, "Instruction on Christian Freedom" 74.

Magisterial teaching on sinful social structures has always resisted claims that structures arise independent of the choices of persons within them, and most often has assumed that structures are the intended creation of those persons. Thus, sinful structures are typically described as the result of personal sin, the concrete sinful acts of individuals who introduce them. The rationale here is clear: to prevent persons whose interests are served by sinful structures from claiming that, because they did not create those structures, they are exonerated from any responsibility for the injustices structures cause in the lives of so many, especially the poor and marginalized.

Theological reflection on this issue, however, has questioned both the assumption that sinful structures are of necessity created by sinful acts and the rationale behind that assumption. Gregory Baum cautions that not all sinful institutions have been created with sinful intention. Even "the best of intentions" can lead to "hidden contradictions implicit in the institutional structure,"[18] though he does not provide an account of how this occurs. And this acknowledgement need not be understood to render the beneficiaries of injustice innocent. Summarizing this position, Heyer argues that "structures are then both consequential and causal in nature, and we are subjectively responsible for sinful situations that remain subject to external influences."[19] Two assumptions seem to be implied here. The first is that if a sinful social structure can be altered for the better, we have an obligation to do so. The second is that if we play a role in sustaining a sinful social structure—or if we simply benefit from one—we are morally responsible (along with others, of course) for the injustice it causes.

How Do Social Structures Work?

> Being necessary in themselves, they [structures] often tend to become fixed and fossilized as mechanisms relatively independent of the human will, thereby paralyzing or distorting social development and causing injustice . . . Institutions and laws, when they are in conformity with the natural law and ordered to the common good, are the guarantees of people's freedom and of the promotion of that freedom. One cannot condemn all the constraining aspects of law, nor the stability of a lawful State worthy of the name. One can therefore speak of structures marked by sin, but one cannot condemn structures as such.
>
> Joseph Ratzinger, *Second Instruction on Liberation Theology*[20]

Magisterial teaching on social structures acknowledges their powerful influence on human choices. Structures limit human freedom to some extent, though how this occurs is not described. Theological interpretations of the meaning of that limitation have varied greatly. José Ignacio Gonzales Faus argues that "this is why the community and the structures governing life together in it can create, more easily than the individual, a series of situations making necessary (and therefore apparently reasonable) ways of behaving which favor individual greed, even though these harm the life

18. Gregory Baum, "Structures of Sin" 114.
19. Heyer, "Social Sin" 425.
20. Joseph Ratzinger, "Instruction on Christian Freedom" 74.

and dignity of many others."[21] Gregory Baum, clearly resisting any notion of necessity, instead says that "sinful economic and political structures tend to create a culture of conformity and passivity," a defense of human freedom but within a context where the person is led to be passive.[22]

Peter Henriot refers to this passivity generated within structures as the "silent acquiescence in social injustice."[23] In an effort to capture the interplay of freedom and conformity, Baum, who treats sinful structures and social sin as a single notion, speaks of voluntary and nonvoluntary dimensions of social sin,[24] a distinction endorsed in Heyer's summary of theological reflection on social sin.[25]

In an analysis that comes closer to a sociological view of structure, a number of theologians have employed the idea of a reciprocal relation between structures and persons, a view articulated by Cardinal Ratzinger above, as a way to endorse both the constricting effects of structure and the choices always available in human freedom. As Kenneth Himes has put it, "we create and are created by our culture."[26] Discussing liberation theology, Heyer observes that "on this view, both institutions and ideologies created and sustained by persons *and* persons shaped by institutions and ideologies are guilty of sin and therefore in need of transformation."[27] And a more thorough understanding proposed by Cardinal Ratzinger above recognizes the effects of both good and bad structures. Peter Henriot points out that "properly functional social structures provide greater and better opportunities for human growth available to all groups in society. Unjust and unresponsive social structures hinder this human growth and freedom, thereby oppressing human dignity."[28]

Summary

A helpful way to summarize the approach of official Catholic theology to sinful social structures is provided by the view of Ratzinger, in his 1984 "first instruction" on liberation theology.

> Nor can one localize evil principally or uniquely in bad social, political, or economic "structures" as though all other evils came from them so that the creation of the "new man" would depend on the establishment of different economic and sociopolitical structures. To be sure, there are structures which are evil and which cause evil and which we must have the

21. Gonzáles Faus, "Sin" 536.
22. Baum, "Structures of Sin" 113.
23. Peter Henriot, "Social Sin: The Recovery of a Christian Tradition," in *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*, ed. James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead (New York: Seabury, 1980) 129–30.
24. Baum, "Structures of Sin" 116.
25. Heyer, "Social Sin" 417.
26. Kenneth R. Himes, "Social Sin and the Role of the Individual," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1986) 183–218, at 186.
27. Heyer, "Social Sin" 422.
28. Henriot, "Social Sin" 130–31.

> courage to change. Structures, whether they are good or bad, are the result of man's actions and so are consequences more than causes. The root of evil, then, lies in free and responsible persons who have to be converted by the grace of Jesus Christ in order to live and act as new creatures in the love of neighbor and in the effective search for justice, self-control, and the exercise of virtue.[29]

On the one hand, structures have causal impact: they can be evil and they cause evil. On the other hand, Ratzinger is careful to defend freedom, something necessary for religious conversion, he argues, and threatened if one assigns too much causal impact to social structures. Further, his claim that structures "are consequences more than causes" helps to focus attention on human agency and freedom.

However, Ratzinger leaves a number of problems unaddressed. As with the other sources quoted above, there is no description here of just how structures cause evil. Implied here is that this cause operates in a sort of mechanistic way that violates human freedom. But what if social structures have their impact by means of human freedom, by changing the options people face? In addition, he seems to assume that "structure" refers to very large institutions, economic, political, or social. But what if the typical Catholic parish is also a social structure? If so, presumably he would not think that true religious conversion must happen outside of the influence of social structures. What if preaching, spiritual direction, and repentance all occur and are made possible by (beneficial) social structures? Finally, consider his claim that structures are "consequences more than causes." If your parish, the college you attended, Stalin's government, and the Wednesday night bowling league are all social structures, is it really helpful to describe them as consequences more than causes? Surely they are both. And the incommensurability of the ways they are cause and consequence renders any judgment of "more" or "less" deeply questionable.

Theological Criteria for Employing Social Science

To understand social structures, theology needs to rely on the academic discipline that specializes in their study: sociology. Henriot, Himes, and Daly have made helpful theological use of the classic work on "the social construction of reality" of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann.[30] Still, a more robust engagement with sociology is needed for an adequate conception of what social structures are and how they operate.

Yet a problem immediately arises: there are multiple explanations for social structures on offer within that discipline. Thus theologians face an important question: How might an outsider to sociology decide among the options there? The answer, in very

29. Joseph Ratzinger, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'" 15.
30. See Henriot, "Social Sin" 130–31; Himes, "Social Sin" 187; and Daly, "Structures of Virtue" 353. See also Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

brief form, is that some basic commitments in Catholic theology render certain sociological options better than others.[31]

Fundamental here are Christian understandings of the character of the human person, created in the image of God, endowed with free will, and flourishing within community.[32] This has important implications for an adequate conception of both the individual and human community.

Concerning the former, any social scientific perspective will need to be nondeterministic. That is, it must appreciate the radical character of human freedom. At the same time, however, it must recognize the constraints on that freedom which individuals face in their daily life within social structures, as the brief review of magisterial teaching above has indicated. Persons in community act freely, even though under constraint, and social relationships in community, when functioning well, make personal flourishing possible.

Concerning a social scientific understanding of human community, Catholic social thought has always attempted, as Pope Pius XI put it, to "avoid the reefs of individualism and collectivism,"[33] each of which generates errors both in a description of social life and in its prescriptions for improving that life.

Collectivism has fallen out of favor in Western culture compared to its status a century ago, but its errors remain fundamental. Descriptively, it views the individual person as subsidiary to the community or state, whose life and decisions are far more important causally than those of its members. Prescriptively, collectivism calls for the subordination of the life projects of individual persons to that of the collectivity.

Individualism has come to predominance in Western culture, particularly in the United States, and, while its errors are no more fundamental than those of collectivism, they are far more destructive today due to the prevalence of an individualistic

31. This is a claim far different from that of John Milbank and "radical orthodoxy," that Christian faith requires narrative and historiography "but finds no room whatsoever for 'social science.'" For Milbank, "the social knowledge advocated is but the continuation of ecclesial practice." He denies nearly all autonomous insight to the social scientist. Milbank is right that Christian theology cannot simply accept whatever social scientists assert to be true. When science begins to tell us who we are—as social science theories of human decision have to do—a philosophical and theological judgment has to be made. But he errs when he gives theology too much authority over science. At stake here is the appreciation of science attributed to Paul Tillich: that a strength of science from which theology should learn is its "humility before the fact." Theology has much to learn from sociology and the other social sciences, even though some options within any particular social science are intellectually unacceptable and none of the options can fully plumb the depths of a life of Christian faith. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) 71 and 6.

32. Given the constraints of space, little attempt will be made to justify such claims about theological commitments, but they are sufficiently basic to be largely uncontroversial in Catholic theology.

33. Pius XI, *Quadregesimo anno* 110, http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno.html.

mindset in intellectual discourse, popular culture, and the self-understanding of so many people.[34] Descriptively, individualism understands social life as no more than the interaction of individual persons trying to achieve their goals, whether selfish or altruistic. Invisible in this view of life are the myriad of ways in which social structures influence—for good or ill—the persons within them.

The deeply communal sense of human existence in Catholic thought has often been referred to as an "organic" view of social life, society being more like an organism than a network. A similarly Catholic view of institutional life has led Pope John Paul II to speak of the "subjectivity" of society:

> Authentic democracy . . . requires that the necessary conditions be present for the advancement both of the individual through education and formation in true ideals, and of the "subjectivity" of society through the creation of structures of participation and shared responsibility.[35]

According to this analogy, society "thinks out" its problems through the interaction of the many civil society organizations in vibrant democratic life.

Prescriptively, individualism stresses the primacy of individual rights and is deeply suspicious of law and government and any other institutions that might restrict individual freedom. In the Catholic view, however, law and structure, when properly constituted, are not threats to human freedom but actually enable and enhance it. Taxation is not theft but the way a people pools its resources to accomplish common goals. Democracy does not pit the "us" of ordinary citizens against the "them" of government but is instead self-government, even when a political party we fundamentally disagree with has been elected to lead that government.

Beyond these commitments, Catholic theology requires an additional, philosophical conviction that entails a view of human knowledge. It can be stated quite briefly. One of the primary philosophical developments in recent centuries that has led to a loss of intellectual respectability for religious faith is the conviction that our five senses are the only trustworthy source of knowledge. And according to this view, roughly termed empiricism, those who espouse any sort of religious faith violate this fundamental epistemological principle. On the contrary, however, Catholics, and nearly all other persons of religious faith, understand that we can know (with varying degrees of certainty, of course) far more than what we directly perceive through our five senses. As a result, any adequate social science should embody this broader view of knowledge as well.

Thus we can sum up this cluster of theological commitments helpful in sorting through the options within sociology by observing that Catholic thought is non-collectivist, non-individualist, non-deterministic, and non-empiricist. Theology can

34. One of the fundamental insights of the sociological study *Habits of the Heart*, by Robert Bellah and colleagues, was that Americans use a far more individualistic language to describe themselves than their communally involved lives would merit. See Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985).

35. John Paul II, *Centesimus annus* 46.

still learn from the insights of social scientific perspectives that are collectivistic, individualistic, deterministic, or empiricist. But when theologians import a social scientific way of thinking about the world into their own analysis, they should indeed be careful how they choose.

The Options within Sociology

Sociologist Douglas Porpora has described the four most prevalent options within sociology for understanding the character of social structures.[36] The first sees them as "patterns of aggregate behavior," and the second as "collective rules and resources that structure behavior." The third views structures as "law-like regularities that govern the behavior of social facts." The fourth understands social structures as "systems of human relations among social positions." This fourth, it will be argued here, is clearly more appropriate for use in the efforts of Catholic social thought to address the ethics of social structures.

Individualism

Consider the first two options. Some sociologists such as George Homans[37] and Randall Collins[38] have seen structures as simply "patterns of aggregate behavior." Others, most notably Anthony Giddens,[39] have viewed social structures as "collective rules and resources that structure behavior." The first approach tends toward "methodological individualism," a descriptively individualistic view of social life. But even the second describes the social world in an individualistic way. As Porpora puts it, "like Collins, Giddens denies that social relationships themselves have any independent causal properties."[40]

The individualistic lens for interpreting social life is quite pervasive in contemporary Western society, particularly in the United States. Two examples can illustrate the inadequacy of ignoring the influence of objective social relations and focusing too much on individual choices.

Native English speakers face opportunities for ease of travel around the world because English is a first, or more often second or third, language for so many others on the planet. Persons growing up in Italy, Brazil, or Sri Lanka face significant linguistic restrictions when undertaking similar travel. They are far less likely to find people

36. Douglas V. Porpora, "Four Concepts of Social Structure," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 19 (1989) 195–212.
37. George C. Homans, "What Do We Mean by Social 'Structure'?" in *Approaches to the Study of Social Structure*, ed. Peter Blau (New York: Free Press, 1975) 53–65.
38. Randall Collins, "On the Micro-Foundations of Macro Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* 86 (1981) 984–1014.
39. Anthony Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (Berkeley: University of California, 1981).
40. Porpora, "Four Concepts" 201.

in other nations who speak their native tongue and thus will either need a translator or must learn the local language or English, any of which imposes a significant cost that the English speaker need not pay. This difference in opportunities and restrictions is rooted in objective relationships in the world that have a causal impact in the lives of individuals.

For a second example, consider electoral politics.[41] In the United States, every member of the House of Representatives is up for election every two years. When the election is over, we say that "the people have spoken." And while there is much truth to this, it is also seriously misleading, due to gerrymandering.[42] Election districts can be and often are drawn by political party A, which has a majority in state government, so that some districts contain very large proportions (e.g., 70%) of members of party B while many districts contain a comfortable majority (e.g., 55%) of members of party A. In this way, a party with fewer members can gain more seats in government than a competing party with more members. And once the districts are established, the party in power is hard to unseat.[43]

Thus, interpreting election outcomes as simply the result of the voting by individuals conceals the causal impact of structural forces at play and far overstates the causal efficacy of the action of individual voters. The same is true for individualistic interpretations of vacation travel, economic markets, and a host of other aspects of social life. Thus these first two sociological options for understanding social structures are excessively individualistic and inappropriate for use within Catholic social thought.

Collectivism

A third perspective within sociology arises from the work of Emile Durkheim and more recently from sociologists such as Peter Blau[44] and Bruce Mayhew.[45] It understands social structures as "law-like regularities that govern the behavior of social facts."[46] This approach tends to be quantitative and empiricist in relying on statistical analysis to uncover such regularities. The psychological level of experience is largely

41. I am indebted to Margaret Archer for my Americanized version of her example. See Archer, *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (New York: Cambridge University, 1995) 54–55.
42. This feature of US elections, or more realistically the fate of a third party that gets 20% of the vote nationwide but no seats in Congress, is the reason many other nations employ some form of proportional voting.
43. The relevance of gerrymandering in the United States today was amply illustrated in the elections of 2010. All Democratic candidates for the House of Representatives together received 1 million more votes than did Republican candidates, but the election resulted in a 34-seat majority for the Republican Party.
44. Peter Blau, *Inequality and Heterogeneity: A Primitive of Social Structure* (New York: Free Press, 1970).
45. Bruce Mayhew, "Structuralism versus Individualism: Part One. Shadowboxing in the Dark," *Social Forces* 59 (1980) 335–75.
46. Porpora, "Four Concepts" 195.

ignored and social structures are assumed, as Porpora puts it, to operate "mechanically and naturalistically over the heads of individual actors."[47] Because this approach does not take seriously enough the reality of individual agency and freedom, it is not a helpful model of structure for use within Catholic social thought.

In sum, the problem with these first three approaches within sociology is, according to Archer, that individualism makes structure "inert and dependent," while collectivism leads to the "subordination or neglect" of agency.[48] Catholic social teaching rejects both of these options, recognizing the influence of structures but refusing to subordinate human freedom to them.

Critical Realism

The fourth conception of social structure within sociology is the "critical realist" approach taken by Porpora and Archer. This view understands social structures as "systems of human relations among social positions."[49] What this means and why it is compatible with the theological commitments of Catholic thought articulated above will become clear with further description.

What Is Critical Realism?

Critical realist sociology arises out of a critical realist understanding of science more generally, encompassing both natural and social science. The central figure here is the late philosopher of science Roy Bhaskar, who set out to overturn 250 years of empiricism since David Hume. He makes clear that there are, and we can learn about, "ontologically real" things that cannot be perceived by our five senses.

A Critique of Empiricism

As a view of how science operates, critical realism arose out of a frustration with the inadequacies of empiricist interpretations of what scientists do.[50] Following the work of Hume in the mid-18th century, most philosophers of science came to argue that we can only have confidence in the data we perceive through our five senses. This view that we can have no access to how or why causality works has perhaps been most concisely articulated by John Stuart Mill in his description of the views of Auguste Comte:

> We have no knowledge of anything but phenomena . . . We know not the essence, nor the real mode of production, of any fact, but only its relations to other facts in the way of succession

47. Ibid. 198.
48. Archer, *Realist Social Theory* 33.
49. Porpora, "Four Concepts" 195.
50. Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2008). For a brief summary of his critique of Hume, see 11–20.

> or similitude . . . Their essential nature, and their ultimate causes, either efficient or final, are unknown and inscrutable to us.[51]

Mill's definition of causality is typical of the tradition. The cause of a phenomenon is "the antecedent, or the concurrence of antecedents, on which it is invariably and unconditionally consequent."[52] If phenomenon "B" invariably and unconditionally follows phenomenon "A," then A is the cause of B. This is what causality means in empiricism. Thus, the physicist in the lab, by isolating experiments from outside influences, strives to discover these sorts of invariant sequences of phenomena, to discover scientific "laws" that govern those phenomena. Laws, of course, are statements of those invariant and unconditional sequences. As Bhaskar puts it, "a causal law is analyzed in empiricist ontology as a constant conjunction of events perceived."[53] The classic example here is the "law of gravity."

This leads to a conception of scientific laws as the causal "forces" in operation, even though this is a very thin version of causal force: it is no more than a statement about a sequence of phenomena. Nonetheless, when I let go of a book I am holding, it hits the floor "because of the law of gravity" since there is no more fundamental "how" or "why" to which empiricists think we can have any access.

Bhaskar objects to this construal of causality. He argues instead that scientists in the lab are not (and do not see themselves to be) simply describing an invariant sequence of events, but they are more robustly making a claim about how things "out there" in the real world actually operate. How else, Bhaskar asks, could one assume that invariant patterns discovered in the closed system of the lab (where scientists work hard to eliminate outside influences) would also be effective in the "open" system of the real world (where invariant sequences of events almost never occur)?[54]

The Reality of the Transfactual

What empiricists call laws are, in the critical realist view of things, simply human descriptions of what's going on between real objects in the world. The book does not hit the floor "because of the law of gravity." It hits the floor because of the relation of the book and the earth, and the force (not a law) of gravity which that relation generates. The law of gravity is simply the scientist's summary of the ontologically real causal relationship between the earth and the book. Bhaskar accuses empiricists of committing "the epistemic fallacy": reducing ontologically real relations in the world to no more than matters of human knowledge.[55] The ontologically real relation between earth and book is interpreted by empiricists as no more than a matter of our knowledge of its consequences (that one event follows on another). This relation between book

51. J. S. Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, 5th ed. (London: N. Trübner, 1907) 6.
52. J. S. Mill, *A System of Logic* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1874) 245.
53. Bhaskar, *Realist Theory of Science* 33.
54. Ibid. 33.
55. Ibid. 36–40.

and earth cannot be perceived by our senses, but it is nonetheless quite real, a "transfactual" (i.e., not-sense-perceptible) thing that science can study and come to conclusions about. The same is true of a magnetic field, which is also beyond what our five senses can directly detect.[56]

Even though we are speaking of what cannot be observed, there is no mysticism here. For critical realists the central task of all science is to begin with our empirical grasp of the actual events we perceive in the world, especially those events scientists carefully orchestrate in the laboratory, in order to hypothesize about the invisible powers that cause events to occur. As sociologist Christian Smith argues,

> scientific inquiry as a project should be concerned more with the structured properties of causal relations and mechanisms than with the regularity of observable sequences of events—theorizing unobserved causal dynamics is what the best of science actually does and is more important than measuring the strength of association between variables.[57]

To clarify, Bhaskar distinguishes the empirical, the actual, and the real, each a "domain of reality" that includes the previous domain.[58] First, the empirical is the sum total of events that are perceived: all experiences. Second, the actual is the sum total of everything that occurs: all events, including but not limited to experiences. The fall of a dead tree so deep in the Amazon that no one will ever perceive it is nonetheless an event. Third, the real includes not only everything that happens (all events, whether perceived or not) but also the causal forces—the powers or "mechanisms" that bring about those events, including the relation between that Amazonian tree and the earth, a relation that generates the force of gravity that brings the tree down. For critical realism, it is foolish to limit science to only the empirical, and the primary evidence is that this does not describe either what practicing scientists are doing or what they understand themselves to be doing.

Emergence and Stratified Reality

The reality of the transfactual is one major contribution of critical realism; the importance of "emergence" is a second. Emergence occurs when two or more "lower level" elements combine to form a "higher level" element that has different characteristics.[59] The most well-known example is water. Although it is composed of hydrogen and oxygen and "emerges" from them, water's characteristics are quite different from either. Water puts out a fire, while hydrogen and oxygen feed it.

This capacity of water to quench a fire is, then, "an emergent property," which in more general terms can be defined as a property "that is not possessed by any of the

56. Ibid. 12.
57. Christian Smith, *What is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2010) 96.
58. Bhaskar, *Realist Theory* 56–57.
59. For a helpful discussion of emergence, see Smith, *What is a Person?* 25–42.

parts individually and would not be possessed by the full set of parts in the absence of the structuring set of relations between them."[60]

Similarly, protons and neutrons have characteristics not present in the up quarks and down quarks that combine to produce them. The human mind emerges from and cannot exist without the electrochemical synapses in the brain, but it has characteristics different from them and can act back upon them. And most important for the issue at hand in this article is the origin of social structures: they emerge from the actions of individuals. As Bhaskar has put it, "the operations of the higher level cannot be accounted for solely by the laws governing the lower-order level in which we might say the higher-order level is 'rooted' and from which we might say it was 'emergent.'"[61] The phenomenon of emergence occurs in all areas of existence, and as we've seen, some emergents are sense-perceptible (water) and some are transfactual (gravity, the mind, and, as we shall see, social structures).

This understanding of emergent realities that exist at a new, "higher" level than the elements that combine to create them leads critical realists to reject "reductionism," the assumption pervasive in empiricist thought that all realities can be explained, at least in principle, by the functioning of their constituent parts. Reductionism claims that "the causal power of the higher-level entity itself becomes redundant to the explanation."[62] This sort of elimination, of course, is the intention of methodological individualists in the social sciences, who see only persons and groups of persons, and not social structures, as causes in the social world. But reductionism is equally mistaken in the natural sciences.

Consider a star as an emergent thing, and its capacity to emit light as an emergent property. A star emits light because of the compression of various nuclear particles under extreme pressure and temperature in the star's core. Those same nuclear particles would not emit light in many other situations, for example being strewn evenly at random across space. "Thus the emission of light from a set of particles that would not otherwise emit it must be accounted for by the level and form of organization that constitute them into a star."[63] Any explanation of a star and its emergent properties as simply the result of the character of the elements that make up a star—thus reductively eliminating any causal role for the higher-level structure—is inadequate.

This distinction is helpful in answering the question whether an emergent thing could have been "predicted" from a knowledge of its constituent parts. On the one hand, it often could not have been anticipated, from even a thorough description of those parts as separate entities. On the other hand, once the emergent reality is understood, one element of a thorough description of any one of its parts *could* include that part's capacity to generate the emergent thing when combined with other elements under the right set of relations and conditions. Reductionists (including methodological individualists in social science) might then claim that a good explanation can be

60. Dave Elder-Vass, *The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 17.
61. Bhaskar, *Realist Theory* 13.
62. Elder-Vass, *Causal Power* 24.
63. Ibid. 60.

had by recourse only to the parts. But just such a structuring set of conditions and relations among constituent parts is exactly what an emergent thing is, and so it is a mistake to think that an emergent property can be explained simply by the characteristics of its parts.[64]

Social structures emerge from the actions of individuals and require the participation of individuals for their continued existence. But structures have an independent existence and independent causal effects in the lives of those individuals, often at odds with the intentions of those who consciously initiated the creation of the structures in the first place. (Many of us have had the experience of initiating a committee or an organization that later developed characteristics or positions we ourselves had to reject.) As Smith notes, because reality is stratified,

> social structures exist at a level other than and above personal human lives. That is the level of the distinctly social, constituted by interactive relationships, usually existent temporally for historical periods that transcend individual human lifetimes, and situated so as to be able to shape human mental and behavioral life.[65]

Social structures are ontologically real and exist at a "higher" level than individual persons or groups of persons (though without thereby entailing any greater explanatory importance or moral significance).

What Is a Social Structure?

As we saw above, the critical realist view articulated by Porpora is that social structures are "systems of human relations among social positions."[66] A social structure—the Webster Gardening Club, IBM, the US court system, or the market for copper—emerges from the interaction of individual persons, often existing far longer than a human lifetime, some demonstrating much greater social complexity than others. But the basic building block of each structure is the relation between social positions, relations that are "preexisting," in the sense that they exist before particular individuals take on those positions. And social structures have causal impact in the lives of those persons through, as Archer describes it, the restrictions, enablements, and incentives which structures present to individuals who operate within them.[67]

No structure is a conscious agent, of course. The causal impact occurs only because conscious human persons make decisions in light of those restrictions, enablements, and incentives–decisions that might be quite different had this person been facing different restrictions, enablement, or incentives. Organizations, a particular type of social structure, possess a kind of collective agency, as when Microsoft announces it will hire 300 more employees, but that agency occurs only through the persons within the

64. Ibid. 23–26.
65. Smith, *What Is a Person?* 328.
66. Porpora, "Four Concepts" 195.
67. Archer, *Realist Social Theory* 65–92.

structure (those in charge). And although such collective agency gets most of the attention – particularly from scholars inclined to methodological individualism – the far more pervasive and powerful impact of structure is through the various restrictions, enablements, and incentives they present to the personal agents within them.

The University as a Social Structure

Consider a university. A university comprises many different kinds of relations among social positions, but the most basic is the relation between professor and student in the classroom. Here, some people enter into the social position of professor and others into the social position of student. Although some things occur spontaneously in the classroom, and other things depend on the unique personalities of this particular professor and that particular student, all this occurs within the relationship between the preexisting positions of professor and student into which those unique persons enter.

Consider a new PhD who takes a first job at a theology department. As that young assistant professor first enters a classroom, she encounters a number of restrictions built into the relation between professor and student, some of which arise from the relation of the position of professor to other social positions outside the classroom. There are, for example, departmental requirements for what topics she must cover in an introductory course, university requirements that she must give grades to her students at the end of the term, and legal requirements that might make sexual relationships with students grounds for dismissal. Just as importantly, however, she faces restrictions generated by student expectations of professors. She needs to avoid droning on in a boring lecture, and she must assign readings, hold office hours, and provide answers to the students' questions. The students also face restrictions. They must read what the professor assigns, take tests on the days scheduled, and sit respectfully in class taking in what the professor says.

Such restrictions do not operate in a deterministic way. As Archer articulates this, "all structural influences . . . are mediated to people by shaping the situations in which they find themselves."[68] Neither faculty member nor student is forced to do things in accord with these restrictions. The assistant professor could refuse to give grades and the student could refuse to do the reading, but these restrictions do mean that each will pay a price for the refusal. The preexisting relation between the position of professor and the position of student has its causal impact through the choices of the persons who take on those positions. This sociological attention to individual agency accommodates well the reservations we reviewed earlier in magisterial accounts of the effects of social structures; persons retain their freedom, even though that freedom is exercised within constraints that make some choices more costly than others. This is how structures have causal impact.

A similar analysis applies to the enablements that the relationship of professor and student provides to persons taking on those positions. Our new assistant professor gets

68. Ibid. 196.

to structure the class, invent creative ways to interest the uninitiated in theology, and devise her own grading criteria (though within the general restrictions of the department and student expectations). Students have the opportunity to learn from a well-informed theologian, to discover how to take a theological perspective on their own lives, and to contribute to earning a college degree. Here too, this relationship among positions has causal effect not in a deterministic way but by holding out possibilities that can be taken up (or ignored) by the persons involved.

These restrictions and enablements are perceived by the persons involved as incentives that are built into the relationship between professor and student. Our assistant professor has an incentive to teach well, both because her department and university require this for tenure and because she will have a more enjoyable relationship with students. The student has an incentive to participate in classroom discussion because it makes things more interesting and an incentive to perform well on the tests because the professor will assign a grade that will influence the student's options in the future.

In all these cases, either professor or student could resist the causal impact of restrictions, enablements, and incentives—each is free—but this choice will indeed have other, typically negative effects in their lives. This, of course, is how social structures are maintained. Because resistance entails a price, most people most of the time make decisions that avoid significant costs and provide significant benefits. They "go along" and sustain the existing social structure by their compliance.

Of course, social structures do change in spite of the price people pay in acting counter to the restrictions, opportunities, and incentives they face. Typically, such change is advocated by those in a social position that generates for them more severe restrictions and fewer opportunities than face others in more privileged positions in that same social structure. Thus, it is no surprise that, a century ago, law and corporate policy concerning labor relations in the United States changed largely because of the resistance of workers, allied in labor unions, who refused to put up with the low wages and poor working conditions they faced. Similarly in university life today, changes underfoot in how universities treat and compensate "adjunct" faculty have come about not at the initiative of administrators (for whom higher adjunct wages will lead to tighter budgets) or even senior faculty (whose future wage increases will likely be smaller if adjunct pay rises) but due to the action of the dissatisfied adjuncts themselves.

There are many other relationships among social positions within a university, each with its restrictions, opportunities, and incentives, for example between professor and department chair or professor and tenure committee. Since this latter relationship entails an incentive to publish articles, it additionally leads to a relation between professor and journal editors, which entails another set of restrictions, enablements, and incentives.[69]

We have focused on a university here, but restrictions, enablements, and incentives confront us in every position we take on in any social structure: whether as an employee

69. It is not simply the young who face such influences on their choices. Although I am a tenured full professor, I am cognizant of the restrictions, enablements, and incentives I will soon face when I submit this article to the editor of *Theological Studies* for publication.

at our place of work, a shopper at the grocery store, a member of the congregation in church on Sunday, or a pedestrian on a crosswalk expecting drivers to act in accord with traffic laws. And, of course, some social structures are more impersonal. The Sri Lankans can't travel as easily in China as Americans, due to long-standing facts of world-language instruction, and many US colleges today face enrollment challenges, due to the number of babies born 18 years ago.

Summary

To summarize, only persons are conscious agents, but social structures have causal impact on the decisions of agents by means of the restrictions, enablements, and incentives which are built into the relationships among social positions that constitute those structures. This causal impact is not a matter of determinism, as any agent can ignore opportunities, resist restrictions, or act counter to the incentives the agent faces. But in each case the agent will be worse off for doing so and this basic fact of social life is the source of the causal power that the structures generate.

Thus there are four implications for a view of sinful social structures. First, social structures are systems of social relations that emerge from the actions of individuals and are ontologically real even though not sense-perceptible. Organizations, that kind of social structure that most immediately comes to mind, consist of relations among positions, and those relations are "trans-factual." We come to know them only from our knowledge of their effects. To interpret an organization as no more than a "group" is an individualist mistake from the critical realist point of view endorsed here.[70]

Second, restrictions, enablements, and incentives (emergent properties of social structures) have causal impact on the persons taking on social positions, but this occurs through the exercise of individual agency and not in a deterministic way. This is critically important for a Catholic understanding of the relation of human freedom and the causal power of social structures. Third, this analysis applies not only to large social structures such as a nation's economic and political institutions, but also to parishes, clubs, and other organizations. Fourth, the causal impact of a social structure can be morally good (e.g., markets encourage conservation when the price of a scarce resource rises, penitents are expected to confess their sins when they enter the confessional) or morally bad (e.g., markets encourage mining companies to pollute nearby rivers, members of street gangs face penalties if they don't participate in gang violence).

How Is a Social Structure Sinful?

Social structures are not conscious agents and so they cannot sin in any literal sense. But since they have causal effect through the choices made by persons within them,

70. Of course, more individualistic sociologists disagree. For example, economic sociologist Mark Grannoveter interprets critical realist sociologists as reifying the relationships within social structures (from an email exchange with the author).

they can be described as sinful when the restrictions, enablements, and incentives those persons encounter encourage morally evil actions.

Magisterial descriptions of such structural evils[71] include any violation of "the demands of human dignity,"[72] the "rights of human persons," "others' freedom," "the dignity and honor of one's neighbor," or "the common good and its exigencies in relation to the whole broad spectrum of the rights and duties of citizens."[73] More generally, such evils often "generate violence"[74] and include "situations of life which are injurious to man's dignity and freedom."[75]

Yet given a sociological description of how social structures have causal impact on human freedom, and a theological description of the sorts of evils sinful social structures can cause, we are still in need of a theological construal of the relation between that impact and those results. How shall we understand such structural influences on human freedom from a theological point of view?

Social Structures and Original Sin

An important insight for this investigation is the intuition implicit in the sentence from *Caritas in veritate* that opened this article, where Pope Benedict pointed to "the presence of original sin in social conditions and in the structure of society."[76] This turns out to be analytically insightful, because, like the sin that can exist in social structures, original sin too is sin only analogically.[77] We are not personally guilty for any sin committed by others in the past. To further this investigation, it will be helpful to review several characteristics of original sin that apply to the ways in which social structures can be sinful.

First, both personal disposition and environment are entailed in original sin. Joseph H. McKenna notes that "much of moral evil is mediated to us by the historical situation into which we are born."[78] That is, as the quote from Pope Benedict indicates, one dimension of original sin is evident in the influence of our environment upon us. Describing the views of Karl Rahner, Kevin A. McMahon has said that "the freedom and integrity of our decisions, already restricted by our individual sinfulness, is further compromised by the decision of others, at times in ways that make their influence, for all practical purposes, inescapable."[79]

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71. These are evils attributed in magisterial documents to social sin, structures of sin, or sinful social structures.
72. Ratzinger, "Instruction on Christian Freedom" 74.
73. John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et poenitencia* 16
74. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America* 56.
75. Joseph Ratzinger, "Instruction on Christian Freedom" 74.
76. Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate* 34.
77. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978) 110–11.
78. Joseph H. McKenna, "Original Sin and the Tractability of Evil," *New Theology Review* 10 (1997) 78–88, at 82.
79. Kevin A. McMahon, "Karl Rahner and the Theology of Human Origins," *Thomist* 66 (2002) 499–517, at 501.

As Rahner himself has said, "all of man's experience points in the direction that there are in fact objectifications of personal guilt in the world which, as the material for the free decisions of other persons, threaten these decisions, have a seductive effect upon them, and make free decisions painful."[80] According to McKenna, "Before the act of freedom . . . we are in a sense already affected by historical evil. Before we have experienced freedom we are deeply influenced, perhaps for life, by the world and the community into which we are born."[81]

Second, original sin has long been understood as a sort of "inclination to evil." As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, "human nature has not been totally corrupted: it is wounded in the natural powers proper to it; subject to ignorance, suffering, and the dominion of death; and inclined to sin—an inclination to evil that is called concupiscence."[82] "Man has a wounded nature inclined to evil."[83] The same individual who is characterized by this inclination to evil is also capable, with the help of God's grace, of choosing the good.

This insight extends to our understanding of sin within social structures, because no social structure is only sinful. The sinful structures of Nazi Germany that facilitated the extermination of millions nonetheless encouraged fortitude and temperance and valued fine music and art, certainly morally commendable characteristics. The sinful structures of Augusto Pinochet's Chile brought torture and death to so many, but also endorsed a form of religious faith.

Third, limitations on freedom that come with original sin operate through our freedom, not deterministically suppressing or destroying it. As Rahner describes it, "we are a people who must inevitably exercise our own freedom subjectively in a situation which is co-determined by the objective occasions of guilt, and indeed in such a way that this codetermination belongs to our situation permanently and inescapably."[84]

To explain this statement, Rahner immediately follows up with a vivid economic example:

> When someone buys a banana, he does not reflect upon the fact that its price is tied to many presuppositions. To them belongs, under certain circumstances, the pitiful lot of the banana pickers, which in turn is co-determined by social injustice, exploitation, or a centuries-old commercial policy. This person himself now participates in the situation of guilt to his own advantage. Where does this person's personal responsibility in taking advantage of such a situation co-determined by guilt end, and where does it begin? These are difficult and obscure questions.[85]

A critical realist understanding of the relation of structure and agency can fill the analytical gap that Rahner points to here when he acknowledges the power of "situations"

80. Rahner, *Foundations* 109.
81. McKenna, "Tractability of Evil" 81–82.
82. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM 405.
83. Ibid. 407.
84. Rahner, *Foundations* 110.
85. Ibid. 110–11.

that shape the circumstances of action but does not articulate how situations impinge on free choices. Nonetheless, the banana example vividly conveys his awareness of the moral ambiguity of free choices within the social structure of the market, where others who produce what we consume are often treated unjustly.[86]

Fourth, under the influence of original sin, one's sinful acts occur with a sense that only part of one's self is engaged here. According to McMahon, Rahner understands concupiscence, the effect of original sin, as an "inertia." "Rahner meant that this inability (characteristic of any finite creature) to act with one's entire self in a given decision precludes the whole self from being engaged whether the decision is for good or for evil."[87] This insight corresponds well to the critical realist understanding that any particular agent may make choices when occupying a social position within a social structure that differ from—or may fundamentally conflict with—choices he or she would make when in other social positions. Sometimes this difference is of little consequence, as when we whisper after taking on the position of a patron at the library. But every day many people face more fundamental conflicts of conscience, as when a manager decides to "cut a corner" morally under threat of losing his job. In a more extreme situation, the virtuous mayor of a small Latin American city may have to decide whether to accept a $50,000 bribe from a drug cartel that simultaneously threatens to kidnap the mayor's child if the bribe is declined.[88]

Fifth, each sinful choice made under the condition of original sin shapes us further. Sin "is certainly not like breaking a window which falls into a thousand pieces, but afterwards I remained personally unaffected by it. Sin determines the human being in a definite way: he has not only sinned, but he himself is a sinner."[89] A part of the change in us caused by original sin is a distortion of our understanding of ourselves and the world as liberation theologians have long stressed. Critical realist sociologists understand the social world as ontologically real and thus objective. As a result it often appears to us who are born into it as natural, like the flora, fauna, and terrain of the earth around us.[90]

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86. A longer work, currently in development, will employ the critical realist understanding of structure and agency along with Catholic social thought to articulate how the causal efficacy of consumers can be traced back, up the long chain of relations between consumer and the banana pickers of the world, thereby grounding in social scientific analysis a theological notion of economic complicity.
87. McMahon, "Theology of Human Origins" 501 n. 6.
88. This example arises from an oral conversation with Gerardo Sanchis Muñoz of the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina. Constraints of space do not allow for parsing how people "handle" such decisions, but Margaret Archer provides a helpful articulation of the process in her treatment of "the internal conversation." See Archer, *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2003).
89. Karl Rahner, *The Content of Faith: The Best of Karl Rahner's Theological Writings*, ed. Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt; trans. and ed. Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 531.
90. How social structures alter the character of persons within them is described by Elder-Vass as altering internal dispositions (*Causal Power* 108–12) and by Archer as entailing "reflexivity" and the internal conversation.

Sixth, the complexity of the situation of human freedom under original sin makes it exceedingly difficult to draw a bright line between human choice and the influence of one's environment. "Inasmuch as the social environment does affect human nature positively and negatively, it is therefore difficult to determine what is 'innate' about human evil and what is environmentally 'contracted.'"[91] From the critical realist point of view, agency always occurs within the causal influence of social structure; structure cannot exist without the choices of free agents whose actions reproduce or alter it. No agency without structure, no structure without agency.[92]

Identifying Sinful Social Structures

The final step in this investigation of how social structures can be sinful requires a description—at best, a typology—that distinguishes good from bad structures of a specific kind, whether these are kinds of economic systems, school districts, or Catholic parishes. Such descriptive typologies may be available from professional social scientists or simply from insightful participants in those structures. And in each case the sinfulness of a social structure parallels "original sinfulness." That is, the structure has causal power through the restrictions, enablements, and incentives faced by persons within it—which incline their free choices toward evil. Those making morally evil decisions typically understand only part of themselves to be involved, in the sense that they may well not ever make such a decision in other circumstances. Thus there is never a bright line between the causal influences of structure and free choice, since structural influence occurs through the exercise of freedom. In addition, of course, that structural influence alters the person's dispositions over time, an insight well known in virtue ethics, slowly shaping the person as one more inclined to make those kinds of decisions.

Let us begin with an example of such a typology from the history of economic development. There is no claim here that everyone adopting the view of sinful social structures presented here should adopt this typology, as there are morally respectable differences of social analysis among sincere and well-informed Christians. The example demonstrates how a descriptive typology aids in any adequate moral analysis of social structures.

In their book, *Why Nations Fail*,[93] Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson ask the same question as did Adam Smith in his famous volume, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*: Why it is that some countries are wealthy and others poor? But these two volumes offer different answers. For Smith, the answer lies

91. McKenna, "Tractability of Evil" 86.
92. See Archer, *Realist Social Theory*, chap. 3, "Taking Time to Link Structure and Agency" 65–69.
93. Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail* (New York: Crown, 2012).

in human nature[94] but for Acemoglu and Robinson it lies in economic and political institutions.

The authors open their book with a comparison of two cities divided by a fence: Nogales, Arizona, and its sister city just across the border in Mexico, Nogales, Sonora. At the time of the creation of the border dividing one city into two in 1853, there was little difference in the people of the two areas. Festivals, religion, food, and music were the same. But the northern half of the city became part of the institutions of United States, which encouraged innovation and the creation of business, something discouraged by the institutions of Mexico. Nogales, Arizona, is poorer than most US cities, and Nogales, Sonora, is wealthier than most Mexican cities—and both currently struggle with the violence of drug cartels. But it is clear to all that citizens on the north side of the border enjoy higher incomes, better health care, and life expectancy, and higher-quality roads, public utilities, and police protection.

A similar example arises in a comparison between North and South Korea. Prior to separation into two nations in 1948, the people of the peninsula shared a common culture and tradition, common beliefs and expectations. The key difference after the division into two nations had to do with the political and economic institutions established. The same can be said about the division of Germany into East and West at the end of World War II.

And what is that difference in institutions? Acemoglu and Robinson propose a typology of inclusive and extractive economic institutions. The inclusive sort

> allow and encourage participation by the great mass of people in economic activities that make best use of their talents and skills and that enable individuals to make the choices they wish. To be inclusive, economic institutions must feature secure private property, an unbiased system of law, and a provision of public services that provides a level playing field in which people can exchange and contract; it also must permit the entry of new businesses and allow people to choose their careers.[95]

Though no set of institutions is perfect, Acemoglu and Robinson argue that the economic institutions of the United States, South Korea, and West Germany have been of the inclusive sort, and ordinary people have benefitted greatly. In contrast, the laws and institutional structures of Mexico, North Korea, and East Germany were "extractive," in the sense that they were "designed to extract incomes and wealth from one subset of society to benefit a different subset."[96]

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94. Smith attributed the greater wealth of England as compared with nations on the Continent to increased economic productivity arising from "the division of labor" (i.e., specialization in work), and he attributed the division of labor to "a certain propensity in human nature . . . to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another." Because people were naturally inclined to barter with each other, they soon discovered that specializing in one type of production and then trading for the other things they need left them wealthier than trying to make everything themselves. See *The Wealth of Nations*, bk. 1, chap. 2 (New York: Modern Library, 1937) 14.
95. Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail* 74–75.
96. Ibid. 76.

This typology has its shortcomings. The authors attribute too much influence to structure and not enough to culture. And the typology itself may sound to some readers as if the authors deny that there are extractive institutions in the more industrially developed nations and no inclusive ones in the developing world. The historic interaction of the USA and Latin America demonstrates clearly a long history of extraction by US firms and the US government itself.

Nonetheless, this typology of inclusive and extractive institutions is helpful in exploring the notion of sinful social structures because it entails an important insight and because the authors are so adamant in stressing the influence of institutions, discounting the impact of personal virtue. Consider, they would say, the difference between the economic vitality and the interest in democracy of the 13 US colonies in 1776 and the state of the economy and polity in Latin America at that time. They don't think North Americans were or are more virtuous than the citizens of Central or South America.

The authors point out that when the British founded the settlement at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, they came intending to employ the model of extractive colonization that had been so successful for the Spanish in South America. That is, the intentions of the British colonizers were no more pure than those of the Spanish. "The notion that the settlers themselves would work and grow their own food seems not to have crossed their minds."[97] Once the new arrivals understood that there was no gold to be taken, Captain John Smith concluded that "if there were going to be a viable colony, it was the colonists who would have to work." Thus in messages he sent back to England he pleaded that the directors of the Virginia Company, the organization responsible for the settlement, should send more people, but especially the right kind of people. "When you send againe [*sic*] I entreat you rather to send some 30 carpenters, husbandman, gardeners, fishermen, blacksmiths, masons, and diggers up of trees, roots, well provided, than a thousand of such as we have."[98] Smith wanted no more goldsmiths, only more settlers who knew how to make and repair things. The colony barely survived the first winters but when more practical immigrants arrived, the settlement took a turn toward the self-reliance and independence of which Thomas Jefferson later spoke so highly. The point here is that it was not a more virtuous intention of British colonizers—they did, of course, turn to the extractive institutions of slavery within a few decades—that led to a different social structure for the colony than those of the Spanish but rather the necessities on the ground.

Acemoglu and Robinson then go on to the next step and argue that once a formal government is set in place, whether economic institutions are inclusive or extractive depends upon whether the political institutions are inclusive or extractive. For example, they argue that the difference in later decades between the US and Mexican banking systems arose not from a difference in the motivation of bankers, as earlier in history US bankers had tried to establish for themselves the same monopolistic advantages as occurred in Mexico. But it was the inclusive political system in the United

97. Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail* 20.
98. Ibid. 23.

States, with politicians ultimately voted out of office if they supported extractive banking monopolies, that made the difference. The structures of democracy imposed restrictions on those holding the position of member of Congress, to good effect.

Of course, Acemoglu and Robinson do not employ critical realism or Catholic social thought in their analysis, but that analysis is sharpened and defended by both. Critical realism describes the mechanisms by which the institutions have the effects Acemoglu and Robinson claim. Catholic social teaching provides the moral warrants, unspoken and taken for granted by Acemoglu and Robinson, that are necessary to judge extractive institutions as violating the rights and dignity of the persons mistreated within them.

The typology of inclusive and extractive economic and political institutions provided by Acemoglu and Robinson is helpful, but it is only one of several possible ways of identifying sinful social structures in economic and political life. A similar typology, distinguishing "the natural state" from "open access orders," can be found in *Violence and Social Orders* by Douglass North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry Weingast.[99] Scholars coming from a liberationist perspective may grant Acemoglu and Robinson the importance of institutions but will certainly criticize their approval of capitalist markets. Even "progressive left" critics would see capitalism in the USA today as extractive. The work of Acemoglu and Robinson is employed here only as an example of the sort of typology that Catholic social thought always employs, either explicitly or implicitly, as it brings the Christian tradition to bear on social events.

And economic and political institutions are only the largest and most frequently noticed sinful social structures. Universities, police departments, social security systems, parishes, and all other structures can themselves be sinful. And in each case, specialists who know well a particular kind of social structure can develop, and often already have on hand, helpful typologies to distinguish healthy from unhealthy forms, functional from dysfunctional, life-giving from life-diminishing, virtuous from vicious, just from unjust, grace-filled from sinful.

At times that sinful character is evidenced in the absence of decent market options facing poor families who are unable to provide education, healthcare, or even food for their children. This lack of options is the greatest evil in trusting markets alone to resolve economic problems. Those with the fewest options suffer the most.[100] In this sort of situation, there is often no one person to point to whose decisions left the marginalized without options. But the sinful effects of structures also and most frequently arise out of the decisions of persons that directly affect the lives of others. In each case of a sinful social structure, some of the restrictions, enablements, and incentives facing persons in social positions penalize rightful action and encourage life-diminishing choices.

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99. Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2009).

100. For an insightful discussion of economic compulsion, see Albino Barrera, *Economic Compulsion and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University, 2005).

In nations where government corruption is taken for granted, office holders find it easy to accept bribes or extort payments and face few restrictions in doing so. In police departments where an unspoken racism prevails, officers stop and harass people of color with disproportionate frequency, as there are few restrictions on these unjust choices. In firms where profit is assumed to be the only goal of the organization, decisions ranging from plant closings to work rules on the shop floor are made with no more respect for the human dignity of employees than the law requires. In a church where the canonical pastor has nearly unlimited authority over parish matters, an autocratic pastor can arrive on the scene and undo in a month the pastoral effectiveness of the parish that took decades to develop. In a department of theology or religious studies aiming to improve its national status, decisions by senior faculty that leave too many untenured colleagues vying for too few tenured positions can tempt the untenured to destructively competitive choices. Many are the varieties of sinful social structures.

And, of course, the moral quality of social structures will be disputed. Many judge to be immoral a campaign finance system where one wealthy individual can legally spend $100 million to influence elections, while some fellow citizens in poverty cannot afford the money or time it takes to obtain a photo-ID now required to vote in some states. Others see such campaign donations as "speech" protected by the Constitution and view photo-IDs as a prudent device to prevent election fraud. The analysis provided here will not of itself resolve such disputes, but its focus on how the privileged and marginalized in any social structure face radically different restrictions and enablements can shift conversations away from individualist interpretations of life toward a more capacious understanding of the structural forces that shape our lives, individually and as a nation.

Two final observations are in order. The first is a reminder that the restrictions, enablements, and incentives people face in social positions in social structures do not only make destructive choices more likely. When well structured, they also restrain sinful personal instincts and encourage generous and life-affirming choices.

The second is that structures and culture exist in intimate relations even though culture has been largely ignored in this article. A culture of racism will support the structural enablement for racial profiling in a police department. A culture of democratic participation will make it more difficult for an autocratic pastor to act unilaterally even when he has the canonical right to do so. The focus on this article on structure should not be taken to infer a dismissal of culture.

Conclusion

Social structures are systems of human relations among (preexisting) social positions. They are ontologically real, emergent "things" that exist at a "higher level" than the individual persons from whose actions they emerge. Structures exert causal impact on persons who take on positions within them by generating restrictions, enablements, and incentives that influence the (free) decisions those people make. Structures can appropriately be called sinful when their causal impact encourages morally evil decisions. What "evil" means depends on the sort of social structure under discussion (e.g., political evils differ from parish evils).

An assessment entailing both moral principles and prudential judgment is necessary in the choice of a typology to distinguish sinful from other examples of any particular kind of social structure, whether as large as markets or as small as neighborhood organizations. This article's analysis of what social structures are and how sinful social structures have their causal impact cannot of itself eliminate the need for this assessment, but it does suggest that any structured group interested in investigating its own moral character might helpfully start with a frank conversation about the restrictions, enablements, and incentives faced by persons holding different social positions within it. Naming privilege and disadvantage does not in itself guarantee justice, but it is a necessary first step.

This article is in several ways preliminary. Specialists in theological anthropology and fundamental moral theology can no doubt provide a more thorough analysis of "the presence of original sin in social conditions and in the structure of society" than the list of characteristics of original sin outlined here.[101] The social scientific typology of inclusive and extractive institutions is certainly only one of many that can be helpfully employed to understand specific sinful social structures. The description of a critical realist understanding of social structures has been brief and incomplete. And perhaps the most important sense in which this article is preliminary is that it describes how a sinful social structure operates but does not present criteria for deciding either which typologies are most appropriate for any particular kind of structure, or, in the end, which particular social structures are sinful.

The aim here has been to introduce the ways in which critical realism and a contemporary understanding of original sin can fill a gap in the magisterial understanding of sinful social structures today. Going beyond simple statements that such structures exist and have impact, we can say what they are, how they arise, how they are reproduced over time, how they can be changed, and most importantly how they have powerful causal impact through human freedom.

This article has provided an introduction to a critical realist understanding of how things that are not sense-perceptible can nonetheless be ontologically real and epistemologically accessible, how emergence leads to the stratified character of reality, and how the relation of agency and structure articulates the powerful causal impact of structures without endangering Christian convictions about human freedom. Each of these holds out the potential to improve Catholic social teaching and sharpen its analysis of sinful social structures.[102]

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101. Others, of course, may prefer a theological foundation more rooted in the New Testament. Luke Timothy Johnson argues for the recovery of the scriptural awareness of "a cosmic power" that is "at work among specifically human and social realities," opposing human efforts to live as God intends. See "Powers and Principalities: The Devil is No Joke," *Commonweal* (September 26, 2011), https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/powers-principalities. Yet for all the truth captured by this "mythic" language, it is far more helpful in prophetic denunciation of systemic evil than in ethical analysis of it.

102. I am indebted to David Cloutier, Douglas Porpora, Daniel Daly, and Michael Vertin for their helpful advice on this article.

Author biography

Daniel K. Finn is Professor of Theology and Clemens Professor of Economics at St. John's University and the College of St. Benedict. Recent books include *Distant Markets, Distant Harms: Economic Complicity and Christian Ethics* (ed.) (Oxford University, 2014), *Christian Economic Ethics: History and Implications* (Fortress, 2013), and *The True Wealth of Nations: Catholic Social Thought and Economic Life* (ed.) (Oxford University, 2010). He is a former president of the Association for Social Economics, the Society of Christian Ethics, and the Catholic Theological Society of America.