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When Is Work Unjust? Confronting the Choice between 'Pluralistic' and 'Unifying' Approaches

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ABSTRACT *Individuals have different experiences of work when they are self-employed, when they perform tasks in the gig economy, and when they follow directives from managers. But such differences are not represented in some of the most prominent non-ideal theories of work. These describe workers as a coherent group, with a position in the structure of the liberal capitalist economy. I present an alternative that does better at acknowledging difference, through a description of work and workers that has greater 'pluralism' and less 'unifying coherence'. Some might insist that their 'unifying' description has superior empirical plausibility. But if 'pluralistic' descriptions are valid rivals to provide an accurate characterization of our current condition, then we should consider whether their use in theory can serve valuable aims. I identify the distinctive and valuable non-ideal aims – epistemic, evaluative, and normative – that can be pursued with 'pluralistic' descriptions of work and workers.*

Individuals have different experiences of work when they are self-employed, when they perform tasks in the gig economy, and when they follow directives from managers. But such differences are not represented in some of the most prominent non-ideal theories of work. These describe workers as a coherent group, with a position in the structure of the liberal capitalist economy. This is non-ideal theory in the sense of evaluating failures of justice (such as 'domination' and 'exploitation') in a model of society intended to be recognizably similar to our own.

These non-ideal theories have a clear, often explicit lineage from Marx's evaluative concepts and descriptions of capitalism. Several prominent arguments with this lineage have also credited feminist theories of patriarchy and structural domination with inspiration.[1] But this very point of inspiration is contentious within feminism: whether there is a coherent group ('women'), defined by its structural position in society. Some feminists propose that the group 'women' depends on the context. There is a plurality of 'women', with different sets of members composing each group. This article takes lessons on how to do non-ideal theorizing about work, by drawing broadly from feminist political theory and from theories of racial justice. I will argue that 'pluralistic' descriptions of work and workers can be used to pursue a set of distinctive and valuable aims of non-ideal theory – epistemic, evaluative, and normative.

My argument in support of 'pluralistic' descriptions of work and workers faces a preliminary objection. Namely, there are already criteria for selecting a description for use in non-ideal theory: empirical plausibility and scope of application. A non-ideal theory can achieve its aims, just in case it is based on an accurate description of the subject to which it applies. In response, I assume there are 'pluralistic' descriptions of work with validity as hypotheses, which can be treated as plausible rivals to 'unifying' descriptions on the basis

of (contested) empirical evidence. Which description should be selected for non-ideal theory, in this case, can be judged in part on the basis of the value of the aims that it supports.

I will argue that there is a continuum of theories of an unjust society, with unifying coherence at one end and pluralism at the other. As a way of placing landmarks along this continuum, I interpret several major works on racial injustice and feminist political theory.[2] At one end of the continuum, the theories start their analysis with ideas of groups ('women', 'men', 'black', 'white'). A society is unjust when it is structured by groups that have certain relationships, such as domination and subordination. I am interested in the other end of the continuum, which is less well populated. For these theories, the analysis starts with a description of plural structures, such as family life, workplaces, and political life. Each structure has rules, norms, and practices that treat individuals differently, thus producing advantage and disadvantage; these experiences are the basis of group membership.

This article begins with interpretative claims about Charles Mills and Susan Moller Okin, as a way of placing landmarks along the continuum. Next, I articulate the elements and aims of a theory of an unjust society. I distinguish between theories that have 'unifying coherence' and theories with greater 'pluralism' in their descriptions of structures and groups. Third, I show how the distinction applies to arguments about work and 'property-owning democracy'. Finally, I defend my argument for using a pluralist description of work and workers against several objections about the value of the aims that can be pursued with it.

1. Placing Landmarks: Mills and Okin

Contemporary theories of work with a Marxist lineage are part of a tradition of non-ideal theory, which starts from an idea of groups in a unified hierarchy. I will argue that this tradition occupies merely one end of a continuum of non-ideal theory. As a way of placing landmarks along this continuum, I will make interpretative claims about Charles Mills, a theorist of racial justice, and Susan Moller Okin, a feminist political theorist. Mills and Okin share a concern with groups, their use of the idea of justice for critical aims, and their explicit use of descriptive claims about societal structures. I emphasize the correspondence between their descriptive claims – specifically whether these descriptions are 'unifying' or 'pluralistic' – and the aims of non-ideal theory that Mills and Okin separately pursue.

Mills self-identifies as a non-ideal theorist, having developed a method that he believes is necessary to evaluate modern liberal societies.[3] This method is the culmination of the criticisms of liberal theories that Mills advanced throughout his career and in joint work with Carole Pateman. In early work, Mills argued that modern societies are structured by a 'racial contract', with whites' domination over blacks.[4] Later, Mills's racial contract was combined with Pateman's idea of the 'sexual contract', into their articulation of the 'intersectional' contract.[5] They criticize liberal methods of reasoning for obscuring these contracts. Both Pateman and Mills criticize impartial methods of reasoning for maintaining a 'deep silence' that reflects the illicit privilege of the reasoner's own group.[6]

Mills's method of non-ideal theory modifies the impartiality requirement in John Rawls's theory of justice.[7] With a thinner veil of ignorance, the reasoner knows facts about the actual society in which he could live.[8] The reasoner selects corrections to this society,

using his descriptive knowledge of its structure and his reflections on principles of justice. He chooses corrective principles to 'dismantle an *already existing* unjust basic structure'.[9] Mills argues for corrective principles to address: race-based inequalities in legal-political status; racial exploitation and economic marginalization; and racism's social forms of disrespect for the moral status of persons.[10]

Liberals respond to Mills that facts can be incorporated at a later stage, when ideal principles of justice are applied to actual societies.[11] In this case, there is not a sharp dichotomy between ideal and non-ideal methods of reasoning about justice. But as I interpret Mills, it is notable that he uses *particular* descriptive facts about the structure of societies – not that he uses facts at all or that he uses them in a certain sequence. He describes modern liberal societies as structured by the differential treatment of groups, particularly racial groups.

Mills provides his most complete description of the groups who occupy the ranks of a society's hierarchy in a chapter of his co-authored book with Pateman. There, Mills describes a hierarchical ranking of white men, white women, black men, and black women.[12] A group's rank within the hierarchy constitutes its relationships with other groups. A subordinate group has a consistent experience of disadvantageous treatment from a dominant group. In Mills's final published book, he refines his explanation for why a group-based structure is unjust with greater elaboration on the principles that he uses to evaluate it. He refers to Rawls's principles of justice regarding legal and political liberties, socio-economic opportunities, and respect. These principles explain why it is unjust for a society to have racially unequal citizenship, racial exploitation, and racial disrespect.[13]

In my interpretation of Mills, I have emphasized that his non-ideal theory uses a description of coherent groups in a unified hierarchy. Mills serves as a landmark that helps to locate his collaborators and sources of influence on the continuum of non-ideal theories. His co-authorship with Pateman indicates that feminist theories of patriarchy, with their descriptions of groups ('women', 'men'), have a proximate position. Mills cites the influence of Marx throughout his career, including in his last book. This helps to locate non-ideal theories that use Marxist descriptions of classes ('workers', 'capitalists') at a position nearby. My next task is to draw from feminist political theory and place a landmark on the other side of the continuum. I intend to do this through interpretation of Susan Moller Okin.

Some interpretations of Okin imply that her non-ideal theory is best placed in close proximity to the Mills landmark. For instance, Mary Lyndon Shanley's interpretation notes that Okin compares gender to 'caste'.[14] A caste system is a hierarchy of groups, occupying positions in relation to one another. Shanley highlights Okin's radical ideal of abolishing gender: 'a just future would be without gender. In its social structures and practices, one's sex would have no more relevance than the color of one's eyes or length of one's toes'.[15] When Okin contemplates a 'just future', she reasons that achieving this ideal would require the abolition of the society's existing gender system, including the groups ('men', 'women') that occupy superior and inferior positions.

It is not my purpose to claim that Okin had exactly one non-ideal theory. Further, Shanley acknowledges Okin's reservations about gender abolitionism. In fact, I think these reservations help explain Okin's motivation for developing a different kind of non-ideal theory, with a more pluralistic description of structures and groups. In her later work, Okin describes the norms and practices of families in some detail, specifically with consideration of (contested) empirical evidence about differences in the experiences of

heterosexual women and lesbians. The family has a norm that assigns greater caring responsibilities to female members than male members.[16] Since this norm does not apply to same-sex partners, gay and lesbian couples tend to share responsibilities equally. Okin praises gay and lesbian families with equal divisions of household labor as 'a model for heterosexual families to follow', with the aim of reducing the vulnerability experienced by some women.[17] If Okin had used a description of a caste system with coherent groups ('men', 'women'), she would not have been attentive to differences in family structure and in experiences among women.

Okin's non-ideal theory describes the family as the 'linchpin' of a society's gender inequality.[18] She argues that liberal theories of justice either overlook the family or overstate its positive contributions to a society's justice. As a result, liberal theories obscure the social conditions and lived experiences of disadvantage in actual societies. While the 'linchpin' metaphor indicates an element with a unifying function, there is still more pluralism than in a caste-like hierarchy. Okin's description of a non-ideal liberal society includes the family, political life, the market economy – all with their own distinctive rules, norms, and practices.

So far, I have placed Mills and Okin as landmarks along a continuum of non-ideal theories, with Mills using a more 'unified' description and Okin using a more 'pluralistic' description. Now I will show how this matters for the non-ideal theoretical aims that they pursue. Both Mills and Okin refer to Rawls's principles of justice to explain *why* actual liberal societies are unjust. But when they explain *how* these societies are unjust, the explanation either has 'unifying coherence' or 'pluralism'. Mills describes the group-based structure of 'modern racial states', noting that this structure bears no resemblance to Rawls's ideal of a 'well-ordered' society.[19] Mills argues that modern liberal states are 'ill-ordered societies', due to their racial hierarchy. By contrast, Okin's explanation refers to the plurality of interactions between the family, political life, and the market economy. Due to these interactions, some women experience disadvantages with respect to their freedom of choice and vulnerability to others on whom they depend economically.

Following from their different explanations of *how* a society is unjust, Mills and Okin offer different normative guidance for agents in these societies. Mills argues for 'dismantling' reforms to the structure of 'ill-ordered societies'. He describes a unitary structure with coherent groups (i.e. 'white men', 'black women', and so on) that are ranked into dominant and subordinate positions. Possibly, this structure could be improved upon by flattening its hierarchy. But there is no potential for a structure like this to fully realize principles of justice. Mills advises agents to dismantle the ranking system, rather than attempting to flatten the gradient of its hierarchy.

With Okin's pluralistic description of society, she can recommend multiple sites for agents to enact change or mitigate for effects. First, she has proposals to change the family's internal organization. Okin encourages liberal governments to provide better enforcement of laws against domestic violence, for instance. Okin is explicit that this reform would not change the liberal character of government, of which she approves.[20] Second, she has proposals that assume it will not be entirely feasible to eliminate familial inequalities. These policies aim to mitigate the broader implications. For instance, she recommends that the state transfers some of the paycheck of the higher-earning partner into the bank account of the lower-earning partner.

Finally, Mills and Okin criticize liberal theories of justice for their epistemic bias.[21] Both criticize unequal representation in the discipline of political theory as a source of bias.

But Mills argues the structure of ill-ordered societies includes 'white ignorance', which serves a function in helping to perpetuate their structure over time.[22] As a further implication of his idea of blacks and whites as coherent groups, Mills is hopeful about blacks' potential to escape 'white ignorance'.[23] By contrast, Okin rejects the view of some feminists that women have distinctive approaches to ethical reasoning. As Okin's recommended corrective to bias in reasoning about justice and in political decision-making, she argues for 'empathetic' listening to a plurality of different views.[24]

Here, I have provided a broader context for the use of feminist theory by several prominent theories of work. There are theories of patriarchy, white supremacy, and class exploitation, which are based on descriptions of coherent groups in a unified hierarchy. I have located them near to Mills's landmark on a continuum of theories of an unjust society. But there are also positions towards the more 'pluralistic' end of the continuum, which describe groups with less stability ('women', 'men') and relevant structures with less unity (families, markets, political decision-making). Okin's non-ideal theory is a landmark on this side of the continuum, although not at the extreme end.

2. A Theory of an Unjust Society: Principles and Description

I have interpreted Mills and Okin to illustrate what I mean by a 'theory of an unjust society' in the broad context of feminist political theory, theories of racial justice, and theories of class exploitation. Here I will explain more fully what a theory of an unjust society consists in and what it aims to do. I do not assume that such a theory is entirely different from a theory of an ideally just society – rather, the theories are parallel in their elements and aims. An ideal theory of justice includes a set of principles and a description of a society's structure. The theory explains *why* this society realizes justice, in the sense of arguing for the importance of the principles satisfied in this society. The theory also explains *how* the society realizes justice, in the sense of describing the structure's features that contribute to its satisfaction of relevant principles.

Similarly, a theory of an unjust society includes a set of principles of justice. It also includes a description of a structure. This is intended as an accurate description of (at least some) existing societies. The theory explains why and how the society *fails* to realize justice. I think there is often an implicit 'theory of an unjust society' in arguments that criticize contemporary liberal capitalist societies. Mills is a useful landmark because he is explicit about it: the 'ill-ordered society'.

Theories at the other end of the continuum are not as explicitly articulated and developed. I intend to develop Okin's, so that it continues to serve as a landmark to orient us. To do this, first I need to take a step back to Rawls's description of the basic structure, because it informs Okin's description of an unjust society. In general, pluralist theories of an unjust society do not need to endorse Rawls's principles of justice or his description of a structure. Pluralist theories share the following description of a contemporary liberal capitalist society: it is structured by the complex interaction of pluralistic sets of rules, norms, and practices of treatment.

In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls describes four types of structures that either realize justice or fail to realize justice. I take up his descriptions of two types of unjust societies, whose structures consist in complex interactions of rules. One type of society is unjust as a consequence of the interaction of its domains (its 'institutions'), even though there is no fault

with any of them individually. Rawls writes, 'it is conceivable that a social system may be unjust even though none of its institutions are unjust taken separately: the injustice is a consequence of how they are combined together into a single system'.[25] In order to identify this type of unjust society, Rawls suggests it is necessary to take the 'wider' contextual view of how the parts fit together into a whole. The 'narrow' contextual view, on its own, provides descriptive knowledge that could be misleading for evaluations of the society's justice.

In addition, Rawls describes a just society with a complex structure. He writes that 'an institution may be unjust although the social system as a whole is not. There is the possibility not only that single rules and institutions are not by themselves sufficiently important but that within the structure of an institution or social system one apparent injustice compensates for another. The whole is less unjust than it would be if it contained but one of the unjust parts'.[26] By implication, this society would be unjust if it failed to realize either possibility that Rawls mentions. A society can be unjust in virtue of a domain that *is* sufficiently important for the justice of the basic structure, when other domains do *not* compensate for its faults.

Okin takes up this implicit theory of an unjust society. A society can be unjust because the family has faults that are important and not compensated elsewhere. Okin argues that the family's faults are important because they have implications for citizens' vulnerability to violence, poverty, and political marginalization. Further, she argues that many citizens (both men and women) have stunted development of their moral character, due to growing up in households with unequal divisions of labor. If individuals actually have these experiences, then the faults in the family have not been compensated elsewhere. Thus, a 'pluralistic' theory of an unjust society explains *how* a society is unjust in the following way. It explains how specific rules, norms, and practices of treatment shape people's experiences. It explains *why* this is unjust with reference to the important principles of justice that are violated.

This way of explaining why and how a society is unjust has implications for the aim of making normative arguments. Okin takes up the possibility that particular faults can be compensated elsewhere, with her normative argument that there should be mitigation for unequal caregiving within families.[27] For instance, she proposes that the state split paychecks between partners. This proposal does not change the economic incentive for families to have 'specialists' in caregiving at home and formal employment outside it. Rather, it mitigates the impact of unequal caregiving burdens for the primary caregiver's experience of economic dependence.

The pluralistic description has implications for the critical aim of correcting epistemic bias. Rawls argues for the use of descriptive knowledge that is gained from a holistic ('wider') view of the complex interactions of social rules.[28] He assumes it is necessary to use descriptive knowledge about specific rules, norms, and practices of treatment (the 'narrower' view), although he emphasizes this less. Okin takes up the 'narrow' view with her descriptive claims about the family. With detailed attention to the rules, norms, and practices of families, Okin identifies failures of justice that have been overlooked by taking the 'wider' view alone.

Practitioners of applied and non-ideal theory can be implicitly referring to a theory of an unjust society, when they aim to identify and explain failures of justice in actual societies, to make normative arguments to agents in those societies, and to correct for epistemic bias. I have argued that such a theory has two key elements: a set of principles of justice

and a description of how a society is structured. By developing Okin's theory, I showed that the pluralistic description has implications for the kinds of evaluative, normative, and epistemic aims that can be pursued.

3. Workers as a Group and Specific Rules, Norms, and Practices in Work

There are prominent theories of work with a clear lineage from the Marxist tradition. Other prominent theories of work include arguments for 'property-owning democracy', which tend to have a more mixed lineage of influences and sources of inspiration for their descriptive claims and evaluative concepts. Some have ideas of workers and capitalists as coherent groups. But many also describe a plurality of structures in liberal capitalist societies, particularly democratic political life, the market economy, and the organization of work.[29] Here I will apply my idea of a continuum of theories of an unjust society, in order to explain arguments for 'property-owning democracy' that are critical of existing liberal capitalist economies and their organization of work.

Is there a contradiction at the heart of an argument for property-owning democracy, when it has both 'unifying' and 'pluralistic' kinds of descriptions – perhaps drawing from both Marx and Rawls? It is not necessarily a contradiction, if it is clarified how these descriptions are being used for specific aims. My claim is that there is the primary task of explaining how and why a society is unjust, which can be performed by either: the idea of the coherent group (workers) or the pluralistic description that implies differences in experiences (e.g. gig economy workers, self-employed workers, workers with long-term contracts). I develop this argument that descriptions can have 'primary' and 'secondary' roles in pursuit of different aims of non-ideal theory, with an exemplar from the literature on property-owning democracy.

Alan Thomas criticizes existing capitalist societies for their 'class-based conflict between capital and labor'.[30] Thomas's argument also refers to the market economy and democratic political life. He offers a causal explanation of how capitalists' power in the market economy is used to increase their power over other citizens in democratic politics. Capitalists can make credible threats to withdraw their capital from the market economy, thereby removing feasible policy options from the democratic agenda. According to Thomas's republican and liberal egalitarian principles of justice, it is in democratic political life that the most important principles of justice are at stake.

Thomas also refers to causal relationships between a liberal capitalist society's allocation of productive assets and its organization of work. If a liberal capitalist society became a property-owning democracy, he reasons that this would change its organization of work. Through the 'macro-economic restructuring of the economy', workers gain access to capital that would provide them with greater bargaining power against their employers. Thomas suggests this would result in the elimination of 'drudge jobs'.[31] He also recommends workplace regulations to allow workers to contest decisions, in case their greater bargaining power is insufficient to protect them from employers' domination.[32]

In sum, there is a lot of detail about the pluralistic structures of liberal capitalist societies and how these structures causally interact. However, Thomas does not use this in his explanation for *why* and *how* a liberal capitalist state is unjust. Across the market economy, democratic political life, and the organization of work, there is the same rule: worker-citizens are subject to power in virtue of their lack of access to capital, by those who do hold

capital. A liberal capitalist society is unjust because it fails to provide worker-citizens with freedom and equal standing, as required by liberal egalitarian and republican principles of justice.

It follows logically that Thomas does not recommend piecemeal reforms to liberal capitalist societies. As I interpret his argument for property-owning democracy, Thomas supports dismantling (recalling Mills) the structure of liberal capitalist societies.[33] A property-owning democracy limits class-based domination by widely dispersing capital among all its citizens. When all citizens gain some access to capital, the division between capitalists and workers will be dismantled.[34]

So far, I have argued that there is no contradiction between Thomas's references to the idea of a coherent group in a unified hierarchy and his pluralistic description of structures. But is there any purpose – or any potential for critical aims – in Thomas's differentiation between the rules of the market economy, democratic political life, and the organization of work? I think there is some potential to make use of the difference between the rules of work and the rules of the market economy. Workers experience power from employers rather than capitalists as such; sometimes employers do not even have capital. I will argue that there is potential for Thomas's description of pluralistic structures to serve at least four kinds of secondary critical purposes.

First, the description of pluralistic structures can add detail to the explanation of why and how a society is unjust. The society is unjust because worker-citizens experience domination by capitalists *and* domination from employers. The latter is an additional detail rather than the main explanation of why a society is unjust, if we follow Thomas's liberal egalitarian and republican principles of justice. In Thomas's view, political freedom and equal standing in society have greater importance than the principles at stake in domination at work. Regarding *how* the society is unjust, it is a further detail that worker-citizens experience domination from employers, as distinct from their domination from capitalists. This distinct detail is most prominent when the employers are not owners of capital, but perhaps workers themselves who hire other workers' services on an informal or ad hoc ('gig') basis.

Second, reflection on the plural rules, norms, and practices at work can provide additional motivating reasons for agents to take up the duties assigned to them in a normative argument. Dismantling the group-based structure of society is a huge task. Additional motivation to take up this duty could be found in the insight that society fails to meet a specific demand of justice in work. It can be psychologically motivating to identify concrete failures that manifest in interpersonal relationships, e.g. between a worker and his employer. In order to gain protection against the domination of his own employer, a worker-citizen could find additional motivation to pursue the transition to a property-owning democracy – and then perhaps seek *further* protections against the employers who are not also capitalists.

Third, reflection on the rules, norms, and practices of work could refine the strategy for *forming* the moral agents who have duties to change the structure. Some theorists support the organization of workplaces into cooperatives, in order to socialize citizens in ways that foster their sense of justice.[35] Addressing dominating workplaces could be a strategic element of the 'dismantling' strategy, as one stage in the development of collective action.

Finally, we might learn more about the plurality of principles of justice by reflecting upon pluralistic structures in which these principles fail to be realized. Knowledge about principles could be valued for its own sake or its utility for critical aims. Employers can dominate workers and violate their entitlements to freedom of occupational choice.

Capitalists' domination in democratic political life, by contrast, threatens workers' entitlements to political freedom and equal standing. We could learn more about the pluralism of Thomas's republican and liberal egalitarian principles of justice by reflecting on the differences between these failures in the pluralistic structures of liberal capitalist societies.[36]

This completes my sketch of how an argument for 'property-owning democracy' can have mixed use of a 'unifying' description and a 'pluralistic' description. The former supports the primary explanation of how and why a society is unjust, while the latter provides supplemental detail for several secondary critical purposes. Now I want to sketch a theory that slides further towards the 'pluralistic' end of the continuum. In this case, the pluralistic description of work and workers has the primary role of explaining how and why the society is unjust.[37]

This theory of an unjust society describes work's rules, norms, and practices of treatment and how they differ from rules, norms, and practices in the family and political life. It describes how work interacts with these other structures and the resulting implications for experiences. Do work's rules, norms, and practices have implications for experiences of financial insecurity, time poverty, poor health and physical suffering, meaninglessness, domination, low self-worth, the thwarted realization of autonomy, loss of community? The theory needs to make a correct attribution of these experiences to work and to its interactions with other structures. In addition to the *how*, the theory must use its principles of justice to explain *why* at least some of these experiences are unjust.

Following from this explanation and evaluation, the theory of an unjust society can support certain kinds of normative arguments. Agents in an unjust liberal capitalist society could seek improvements through piecemeal reforms, either to work itself or by creating mitigations elsewhere.[38] Consider if justice requires access to work that provides esteem from others. Timo Jütten expresses doubt that all citizens could access esteem in work, even if its rules were reformed to reduce precarity, unemployment, and low pay. He doubts this because capitalist societies have norms of production and consumption that assign esteem competitively, thus priming citizens to engage in 'conquests for dignity' in work.[39] I share Jütten's doubts that a piecemeal reform to work would be sufficient to provide all workers with access to esteem. But I do not dismiss the feasibility of piecemeal reforms to work to *improve* experiences of low esteem, such as addressing precarious employment.[40]

Finally, the theory can be used to correct epistemic biases about work and the implications for experiences. For instance, work has rules to differentiate between individuals who are granted the status of 'workers' and individuals who are denied this status. The denial of status can have implications for individuals' vulnerability to abuse and experiences of financial insecurity.[41] The basis for the denial could be the activity, such as childcare or cleaning in another person's home.[42] But workers in the informal economy, in precarious short-term employment, and the gig economy are often denied the status of workers, despite performing all kinds of activities. Thus, another basis for the denial could be the specific form of the relationship between who performs the activity and who pays for it.

Correcting epistemic bias requires a 'narrow' view on work in an unjust society. What are its rules, norms, and practices? It can be worthwhile to solicit testimony from people with status as workers and people with contested status – but this is to gain knowledge about work specifically. Correcting bias also requires a 'wider' view of how work is distinct

from and interactive with the rules of other structures, such as the family's division of household and caring labor.

4. Objections about the Value of the Evaluative, Normative, and Epistemic Aims

So far, I have argued that 'pluralistic' descriptions of work and workers can be used for secondary purposes in a mixed argument (i.e. 'property-owning democracy') or for primary purposes as an alternative to a Marxist class analysis. I support the broader use of 'pluralistic' descriptions because, in part, I assume they are valid, plausible hypotheses with wide scope of application to existing liberal capitalist societies. The other crucial reason for my support – which I further explain and defend here – is that 'pluralistic' descriptions of work and workers can be used to pursue aims with substantial value. I will defend the value of these aims against objections that their explanations and evaluations are fragmentary, their normative arguments are divisive, and that they fail to make use of insight from the testimony of the oppressed.

4.1. Evaluative Aims

I support the use of pluralistic descriptions of work and workers, on the grounds that this can provide a more plausible and persuasive explanation for how and why complex liberal capitalist societies are unjust. On a pluralistic theory, each structure's rules, norms, and practices have implications for how people are treated. These include the expression of low status, restrictions on access to material goods, and positioning of a person in a relationship of power to another. Groups can emerge from individuals' shared experience of this treatment. The basis for this treatment in the first place could be an individual's trait, material possessions, and/or relationships with others. Recall Okin's description of the family's norm regarding the assignment of caregiving responsibilities to the members it marks as 'women' and 'men', who are in intimate relationships with other 'women' and 'men'. Shared experiences of treatment in this structure define groups such as 'women in heterosexual couples' and 'women in lesbian couples'. Similarly, work has many rules and norms regarding skill, effort, responsibility, authority, distributive rewards, and burdens of risk. Certain sets of rules and norms can define groups of 'workers' in which members share experiences with one another.

Many non-ideal theorists, including some theorists of intersectional oppression, would object that this provides a fragmentary explanation of how and why a society is unjust. It seems that a person's treatment at work and family life are separately experienced and additional to one another; this distorts explanation ('how') and evaluation ('why') of the injustices. Intersectional theories of oppression were first developed to address failures to account for black women's experiences, when these diverge from the experiences of white women and black men.[43] The reason for this failure is that race-based, gender-based, and class-based oppressions were described as separate and 'additional' to one another. Intersectional theorists argued that society has oppressions that are not separate, but 'interlocking'; a similar formation is that a society has a 'matrix' of domination.[44] But some think the same problems of the additive model still apply. Oppressions are still described to be distinctive from one another, even as they

'interlock' or form a 'matrix'.[45] Thus, a third descriptive model is that a society's oppressions are 'enmeshed' or 'co-constituting' of one another.[46]

In response to this objection about fragmentation, I borrow from intersectionality theorists to note that *addition* is merely one possibility. Specific rules and norms of different domains can be *interlocking* or *enmeshed* with one another. For an instance of interlocking structures, recall Okin's 'linchpin' thesis. The family has a norm assigning greater caregiving responsibilities to certain adult members. The family also has a rule about making decisions to improve its own material prosperity. Work has a rule to assign greater rewards to individuals with time flexibility. Due to the interactions of rules and norms *within* the family and *with* work, many individuals have the experience of caring for family members and receiving low rewards from work.

Consider, as an example of enmeshed rules, an individual whose workplace marks and treats her as a 'black middle-class woman'. The basis for this treatment is her professional skills and her embodiment. Her treatment in the workplace has implications for her material possessions, her productive activities, and her power over other workers. She lives in a residential community. Its norms provide esteem for the members whom it marks as 'black middle-class women'. The basis for this treatment includes her material possessions, productive activities, and power over other workers. It also includes her embodiment and her dress and behavior during activities after work.

In this example, some of the rules of the workplace are 'enmeshed' with the norms of the residential community. An individual's embodiment is part of the basis for how she is treated in both the workplace and the residential community. Thus, there is the same rule in both structures. Further, her treatment in the workplace is part of the *basis* for how she is treated in the residential community, i.e. her material possessions, her productive activities, and power over other workers. It is part of the basis, but not all of it. For instance, a person can violate her residential community's norms in her dress and behavior after work hours. Despite experiencing the relevant treatment at work, she would not be marked for the community's esteem as a 'black middle-class woman'. Thus, these two structures are not identical or fully enmeshed with one another. They are partially enmeshed ('co-constituting').

I have argued that pluralistic theories of an unjust society are not necessarily fragmentary in their explanations of how and why a society is unjust. A pluralistic theory can incorporate descriptions of how some rules, norms, and practices cohere and endure, because they are 'additive', 'interlocking', and 'enmeshed' with one another – while describing other rules, norms, and practices that lack these features.

4.2. *Normative Aims*

I support the use of pluralistic descriptions of work and workers, on the grounds that this can provide a wider range of normative recommendations to agents. By contrast, many non-ideal theorists aim to recommend solidaristic action among the oppressed. They are reluctant to recommend specific changes that could improve conditions and experiences for some, but not all.

Audre Lorde has a strong version of this objection in her argument that 'there is no hierarchy of oppression'.[47] She objects to the divisiveness that she believes is the normative upshot of the failure to explain the unity of oppressed groups and oppressive structures.

Recall my landmark of Mills, who argues that black men hold an inferior position to white women in the structure of society.[48] In defense of this ranking of groups, Mills claims that race tends to be a more significant disadvantage than gender.[49] Lorde would reply to Mills as follows: since black men share their racial group with black women, black men must be concerned with gender issues so as to address the racial disadvantages they share with black women. White women share their gender group with black women, so the racial issues experienced by their fellow group members must concern them too.[50] While these groups have different experiences, Lorde argues that their experiences are attributable to unified structures of oppression and thus require a response in the form of solidaristic action.

I think the objection about divisiveness applies also and more strongly to pluralistic theories. I respond to Lorde that it is plausible to evaluate specific rules, norms, and practices of pluralistic structures, which are not 'interlocking' or 'enmeshed' with others, and to make normative recommendations accordingly. Consider two individuals who share the experience of being treated with humiliating contempt at work, because neither has the appropriate skills for their roles. For the first person, being treated with contempt is an unusual experience. It is not unusual for the second person, who has many other disadvantageous experiences. The two people have instrumental reasons for concern about one another's experiences, in order to understand the work norm itself and the extent of its *interaction* and *enmeshment* with other domains. But the content of what they learn could be that their shared experiences, and their shared interests in acting to address their experiences of disadvantage, extend no further than their humiliating treatment at work.

The Combahee River Collective's 'Black Feminist Statement' provides another normative argument in favor of solidaristic action. In contrast with Lorde's view that there is no hierarchy, the Collective describes a group at a bottom ranking that is functionally necessary for all structural oppressions. 'If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression'.[51] The Collective recommend that progressive movements should pursue collective action to dismantle oppressive structures for the benefit of all oppressed groups, including black women.

I think the Collective has an implicit principle of ethical priority for the most disadvantaged. The principle supports the normative argument that agents should pursue politically feasible reforms that will address the worst experiences of disadvantage. Theorists of intersectional oppression often express frustration with progressive movements among disadvantaged groups that they perceive to be dominated by relatively privileged members.[52] They criticize the movements' pursuit of piecemeal reforms to improve conditions merely for the relatively privileged.

But pluralistic theories can endorse a prioritarian principle of justice, as a way to explain why a society is unjust and provide normative guidance to agents who are trying to reform it. As I argued in a previous section, there are two key elements of a theory of an unjust society: a set of principles of justice and a description of a structure. Whether a prioritarian principle of justice is appropriate needs to be considered carefully, both for 'pluralistic' theories and theories with 'unifying coherence'. For instance, should agents advocate for a change in the norm regarding the expression of contempt against workers, if this reform would improve the experiences of low-skilled workers – but do nothing for contempt against the unemployed, who are worse off?

4.3. Epistemic Aims

I support the use of pluralistic descriptions of work and workers, on the grounds that this can provide better understanding of workers' specific, diverse experiences.

Many theorists of intersectionality argue that certain groups have standpoints that offer special insights to improve understanding of injustices and how these are variously experienced. Their standpoints include social locations in which people have experience of multiple oppressions.[53] A similar point is that certain identity groups live at the 'border' of multiple worlds.[54] While no standpoint could provide complete knowledge of a society's structure and why it is oppressive, discounting these perspectives is especially likely to produce an incomplete and distorted understanding of oppressive structures.

A pluralistic theory has limited hopes that any particular source of testimony will provide high-leverage insight. A theorist constructing a pluralistic theory would not seek out testimony from the self-employed, for instance, with the aim to gain insight into a liberal capitalist economy's many injustices. But there is still a need for an accurate description of specific rules, norms, and practices, their interactions, and the implications for experiences. Thus, the testimony of the self-employed would be sought for its potential to provide knowledge and understanding about the specific rules of work, or set of intermeshed rules, that disadvantage them with respect to their exposure to financial risk, their lack of recognition from others, and so on.

5. Conclusion

Rather than starting with the idea of a coherent group ('workers'), a pluralistic theory identifies faults in specific rules, norms, and practices of work that have implications for experiences. Work's implications for experiences can include domination, meaninglessness, lack of autonomy, limited distributive goods and time, low self-respect, lack of esteem from others, poor health, and mental stress. A pluralistic theory seeks to explain *how* and *why* a society is unjust, while relaxing the demand to impose coherence on the diversity of work and experiences of workers. This article has argued in support of using pluralistic descriptions of work and workers, in pursuit of a set of valuable aims: more plausible and persuasive explanations for how and why complex liberal capitalist societies are unjust; a wider range of normative recommendations to agents within these societies; and better understanding of workers' specific, diverse experiences.

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NOTES

1 See Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*, 92–114, for an explicit analogy between patriarchy and capitalism. Cicerchia's engagement with feminist theory in "Why Does Class Matter?" is broader and deeper, but she concludes with the same point: workers are a coherent group, vulnerable to domination.
2 Mills, *Racial Contract*; Pateman and Mills, *Contract and Domination*; Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*; Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*.
3 Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*.
4 Mills, *Racial Contract*.
5 Pateman, *Sexual Contract*; Pateman and Mills, *Contract and Domination*.
6 Pateman, *Sexual Contract*, 12; Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," 116.
7 Rawls, *Theory of Justice*.
8 Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, 211.
9 Ibid., 213.
10 Ibid., 201–16.
11 Shelby, "Racial Realities and Corrective Justice."
12 Pateman and Mills, *Contract and Domination*, 165–99. Mills thinks this description could provide a complete ranking of all relevant groups. Class and sexuality could be sequentially integrated into his argument, without changing the hierarchy of the racial/gender groups; Mills, "Intersectional Meditations," 37–38.
13 Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, 215.
14 Shanley, "No More Relevance."
15 Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, 171.
16 Ásta's conferralist account provides a more detailed explanation: members of the family take them to have certain 'base properties', marking them 'as women' and thus conferring a certain social status upon them. Ásta, *Categories We Live By*, 1–2.
17 Okin, "Sexual Orientation," 45.
18 Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, 6.
19 Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*.
20 Okin declines to recommend 'kitchen spies' to regulate familial inequalities; Okin, "'Forty Acres and a Mule'," 246.
21 Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, 59–71; Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, 1–13.
22 See Mills's argument that '*White Supremacy* needs to be taken as a theoretical object in its own right'; Mills, "White Supremacy," 36.
23 Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*.
24 Okin, "Reason and Feeling."
25 Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 50.
26 Ibid., 50.
27 Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, 167, agrees with Okin when he describes gender inequalities within families as 'unjust' and then states that women should be 'compensated' for their unequal burdens.
28 On Rawls's holistic method of reasoning about justice, see Scheffler, "Rawls and Utilitarianism," 443–6.
29 Freeman, "Property-Owning Democracy"; Thomas, *Republic of Equals*; O'Neill, "Social Justice and Economic Systems."
30 Thomas, *Republic of Equals*, 331. Thomas's main departure from Marx is that the groups of capitalists and worker-citizens are divided by the extent of their private ownership of capital, not by the system of private ownership itself.
31 Ibid., 271.
32 Ibid., 272.
33 By preventing economic inequalities from arising in the first place, a property-owning democracy limits the potential for these inequalities to influence democratic politics; Thomas, "Property-Owning Democracy," 112. It also disrupts the intergenerational transmission of wealth and blocks the influence of economic inequalities upon politics; O'Neill and Williamson, "Introduction."

34 Thomas argues that the wide dispersion of capital in a property-owning democracy will 'remove the class-based conflict between capital and labor' since labor will 'now be made up of capital-holding citizens acting in concert'; Thomas, *Republic of Equals*, 331. Similarly, see O'Neill, "Social Justice and Economic Systems," on a political-economic regime's dispersion of power and control.
35 Hsieh, "Rawlsian Justice," 158; Hussain, "Nurturing the Sense of Justice."
36 Other theorists have reflected on work and identified new requirements of justice, such as access to meaning. See Freeman, "Property-Owning Democracy," 32–34.
37 Some arguments for 'property-owning democracy' can be classified as pluralist theories. The multiple faults of work are primary in explaining *how* and *why* liberal capitalist societies are unjust; see Hsieh, "Justice at Work." Alternatively, their faults are co-primary to the faults in other domains; see Freeman, "Property-Owning Democracy"; O'Neill, "Social Justice and Economic Systems."
38 O'Neill counts it as a benefit of his theory of property-owning democracy that it can be pursued through piecemeal reforms; O'Neill, "Free (and Fair) Markets," 93.
39 Jütten, "Dignity," 277.
40 Nor does Jütten.
41 See Halliday, "On the (Mis)classification," on the failure to provide gig workers with compensatory freedoms in their employment, in return for their loss of security.
42 See Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, on the dismissal of black women's work.
43 Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection."
44 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.
45 See Belle, "Interlocking," for analysis of whether this is an accurate interpretative claim.
46 Bernstein, "Metaphysics of Intersectionality."
47 Lorde, "There Is No Hierarchy."
48 Pateman and Mills, *Contract and Domination*.
49 Mills, "Intersectional Meditations," 39–40.
50 Similarly, hooks argues that race and class oppressions are feminist issues; hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 27. See also Haslanger, "Why I Don't Believe in Patriarchy."
51 Combahee River Collective, "Black Feminist Statement," 276. Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection," offers a 'basement' metaphor that resonates with this view of black women at the bottom position among the oppressed.
52 See the frustrations of intersectional theorists with feminists whom they believe support reforms to benefit white middle-class women only; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; hooks, *Feminist Theory*.
53 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 269–90; hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 1–17.
54 Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism."

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