CHAPTER 7

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STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE AND DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE:
The Trajectory in Sen’s Writings

"Individuals live and operate in a world of institutions, many of which operate across borders. Our opportunities and prospects depend crucially on what institutions exist and how they function."2

"We too bow down to power, not to that of a dictator and a political bureaucracy allied with him, but to the anonymous power of the market, of success, of public opinion, of ‘common sense’ – or rather, of common nonsense – and of the machine whose servants we have become. Our moral problem is man’s indifference to himself.”3

INTRODUCTION

“That’s not fair” cries a three year old when the philosopher parent allows an acquisitive well-dressed four year old to put the toy into her purse. In crying out, the child is drawing attention to the parent’s negligence, flawed reasoning, or unjust act. Implicit in this complaint is the hope that the parent (a single authoritative person), will grasp the injustice and act to correct it.

However messy and uncertain a business negotiations about justice with three-year-olds may be, they are distinct from negotiations pertaining to structural injustice. In the case of the three-year-old, a single accused yet authoritative agent considers, decides, and responds (although the response involves others). In the case of structural injustice, multiple agents coordinate joint action, the fruits of which are unjust – thus multiple agents would have to act differently in order to reverse the injustice. For this reason, the appropriate locus of complaint about structural injustice is actually not the unjust structure itself – but rather the multiple hands and minds that drive it.

In this way, an unjust structure might be likened to a Trojan horse. Although a Trojan horse appears to be a single entity, it cannot think nor act on its own behalf. Only persons in its darkened interior, or persons outside, can do so. Thus it might
not prove altogether constructive to expend a great deal of energy urging a Trojan horse to adopt a motto of justice and poverty reduction. However amenable the mild-mannered beast might appear to be to such demands, its ‘views’ are not able to sway the situation at all. Different tactics are required.

But then to whom should we fruitfully address accusations of structural injustice related to human deprivation – and how? Who are the unidentified multiple agents whose action could change the situation?

To address these questions this paper first synthesises the development of public action in the writings of Amartya Sen. It begins with Sen’s well-known work on the role of public outcry in effecting positive change in famine-prone situations. The paper then traces related concepts such as public action and participation, and the role Sen envisages these to take in addressing injustices such as chronic hunger and educational deprivation. The paper also analyses the role of agency in value formation and change. Clearly, Sen’s work comments on ‘democratic practice’ and related collective actions as instruments by which to confront structural injustice. But by what mechanism are these instruments to occur? How would the institutional Trojan horse respond?

Within Sen’s work, one clear possible mechanism relates to the self-interest of decision-makers: politicians facing re-election must respond to crowds. However, many of the committees who operate unjust institutions are not accountable to the public for their term of office, nor will be in the foreseeable future. Sen also commends the cultivation of bonds of solidarity and imperfect obligation in order to connect diverse groups and individuals. But, is this enough?

The paper argues that even if forceful public outcry emerged, there is a further problem – an “embedded collective action problem.” The “embedded collective action problem” is that people within the accused institutions still need to organize and work together for constructive change. Creating incentives and avenues for them to do so could enable Trojan horse drivers who recognise their imperfect obligations, better to act on them.

In this way, the paper synthesises some of Sen’s writings on the terms in question. It draws together threads of Sen’s work that might be of interest to those who argue that the capability approach is individualistic, and to those who claim it ignores power. To engage more directly with those critiques would require, however, a further paper.

Before beginning, let me clarify two terms, which will from the start narrow the terrain of discussion. The paper restricts attention to those forms of structural injustice that arise when institutions are designed to take into account and further some set of interests, but are not designed to take into account other interests that they harm, certain capabilities that they cause to contract, or opportunity costs that their operation entails. Furthermore the institution, otherwise configured, would be able to expand (or fail to harm) those capabilities without comparable or greater harm to other people or groups (rough as these comparisons may be). Thus structural injustice, as interpreted here, is, in principle, amenable to human action and redress. The many examples of alleged structural injustice range from inappropriate structural adjustment conditionalities, to measures taken to attract foreign
investment, to investments in military hardware at considerable social cost, to environmental degradation from industrial waste.

Institutions may be organizations or groups of organizations such as the international agencies, NGOs, government ministries, or private sector firms. They may also be a vaguer set of norms and rules such as public policies, cultural traditions, or economic institutions.

FAMINE AND PUBLIC OUTCRY

The case for relating public policy to a close scrutiny of its actual effects is certainly very strong, but the need to protest — to rage, to holler — is not any weaker. Yet public action, including protests of injustice, can effectively prevent famines. Sen’s work on famine gave rise to this signal insight, which has been explored with energy and depth by a number of others. The insight is often expressed this way: “no famine has ever taken place in the history of the world in a functioning democracy.”

With reference to the topic at hand – namely poverty-related structural injustice – this body of famine studies is central to consider because it was the first to frame hunger as an issue of structural injustice rather than lack of food availability or a market failure or other natural causes.

Hunger is intolerable in the modern world in a way it could not have been in the past. This is not so much because it is more intense, but because widespread hunger is so unnecessary and unwarranted in the modern world... If politics is ‘the art of the possible’, then conquering world hunger has become a political issue in a way it could not have been in the past.

How did this politicization – in which political action was identified as a lever for change and a source for hope – emerge?

The argument was initially built put forward in Sen’s Poverty and Famines, later expanded into three volumes of studies, which examined physiological, market-based, economic, weather-related, and political aspects of famine as well as endemic hunger in different countries. Three observations across these studies support the politicization of famine as an issue of structural injustice.

One key independence that Sen established empirically and early was the independence of famine from food production and availability. For example, the famines in Bengal 1943, Ethiopia 1973 and Bangladesh 1974 all occurred in the absence of a decline in food availability. Further, Sen observed that since 1947 when India became independent (and since which it has not experienced famine), per head production levels were lower than nineteenth century levels and also lower than in many famine-affected countries. India was also subject to droughts and floods of a magnitude sufficient to cause famine conditions. Famine is a case of structural injustice because it can be addressed by human action.

Another observation was that famine impacted different sections of the population unequally: “different groups typically do have very different commanding powers over food, and an over-all shortage brings out the contrasting
powers in stark clarity.”

This gave further evidence of injustice: that some weathered the famine intact – or even with economic gain – while others perished.

A third observation related to the feasibility of a public response. Having studied successful experiences in avoiding famine, especially in India and many African countries, Drèze and Sen observe that

These experiences firmly demonstrate how easy it is to exterminate famines if public support … is well planned on a regular basis to protect the entitlements of vulnerable groups. … It is also clear that the eradication of famines need not await a major breakthrough in raising the per-capita availability of food, or in radically reducing its variance (even though these goals are important in themselves and can be – and must be – promoted in the long run by well-organized public policy). Public action can decisively eliminate famines now.

These observations about the injustice of famine and the potential for human response (however fallible and imperfect) enabled famine to be framed as a political issue, in the sense that action by the public at large could catalyze the necessary public and economic actions which might not arise in the absence of public outcry. No attempt was made, however, to argue that adequate policy responses to famine conditions – or indeed conditions of hunger more generally – would always look the same. Rather, Drèze and Sen argued that hunger occurs in populations with a diversity of political systems, agricultural systems, forms of collective action, and social balances of power. Further, the ‘public’ is heterogeneous in terms of “class, ownership, occupation and also gender, community and culture” so public action needs to be itself closely observed because it will often seek to benefit only selective groups rather than the whole. Hence state action and the policies appropriate to a given situation may take a wide variety of forms, which may involve employment provision (in particular), food production, food distribution, the maintenance of food stocks, health care and epidemic controls, adjustments to incentives, early warning systems, and actions to induce economic growth and expand economically productive activities. And of course, the market can and must complement public action, but again its potential will vary in different settings. For example if income support for the need is available, the markets may be able to provide the needed food. The capacity of particular markets, the states, and publics at a given time differ widely and must be examined. Hence, “The need to consider a plurality of levers and a heterogeneity of mechanisms is hard to escape in the strategy of public action for social security.”

Thus public action can be an effective catalyst even though the policy actions it must catalyse are complex and varied.

As the title of Hunger and Public Action suggests, the set of actions which did emerge systematically as of critical importance for sustained responses to famine included political protest, journalism and other forms of adversarial as well as cooperative conflicts between the state and participants from the public at large. These informal mechanisms of reporting and anticipating famine threats were described as being effective on various levels. For example at a basic level, they simply provide information about an impending situation – information that was dreadfully lacking in China during its great famine in 1958-61. They could also, in various ways, apply pressures “that may make it politically compelling to respond to these danger signals and do something about them urgently.” In this way,
The remaider of the paper will explore whether and how other kinds of extreme human deprivation may be politicised so as to catalyse an effective response. But it is worth pointing out that this conversation is premised on democratic conditions. It leaves unaddressed the evident problem of what forms of collective action (if any) would be effective in dictatorships, authoritarian regimes, or false democracies, in which those who raise an outcry are coercively silenced.

DEPRIVATION AND PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES

_Hunger and Public Action_ also fingered the very obvious next-door problem that, while public mechanisms of democracy seem to be sufficient for addressing famine, the same public mechanisms are clearly insufficient for addressing endemic hunger. India, for example, has done well in famine prevention, but shockingly poorly in the elimination of undernourishment. Rather than arguing that public outcry was not relevant in this case, Drèze and Sen argued repeatedly that it was terribly important in these cases as well – just more difficult. They wrote, “the elimination of regular hunger and undernutrition is a much harder task than the eradication of famines” because the numbers of people affected are far greater, and because the methods needed for a remedy are wider and longer term. Put simply, hunger is a “many—headed monster”. In particular, the elimination of hunger requires attention to employment and food entitlements, but also the promotion of health care and elementary education, as well as clean water, living quarters, and sanitation.

As in the case of famine, Drèze, Sen, and others identified numerous countries that have done well on these things – with and without economic growth. Success cases had in common “the use of public support in general – and of public provisioning in particular” – as well as accurate information and political determination. Importantly, they also found that measures sufficient to redress hunger are affordable even to poor countries. Finally, here again, systematically, the authors found that in a pluralist setting, action by the public-at-large could complement public provisioning in critical ways, and it could also serve an essential adversarial role in holding political leaders accountable for sustaining policies necessary to combat deprivation. _Hunger and Public Action_ concludes with these sentences: “It is, as we have tried to argue and illustrate, essential to see the public not merely as ‘the patient’ whose well-being commands attention, but also as ‘the agent’ whose actions can transform society. Taking note of that dual role is central to understanding the challenge of public action against hunger.”

_India: Development and Participation_ also developed the case for strengthening public participation and democratic practice because of its instrumental role in reducing deprivation (as well as other instrumentally and intrinsically valuable roles it may have). Here the treatment is more systematic. In _Hunger and Public Action_, the term ‘public action’ had encompassed both the participation by the public-at-large as well as public policies and government action. In _India: Development and Participation_ a number of distinctions are identified. One is the distinction between
democratic ideals (freedom of expression, participation in key decisions, equitable distribution of power, public accountability), democratic institutions (for example the market, constitutional rights, effective courts, responsive electoral systems, functioning parliaments and assemblies, open and free media, and participatory institutions of local governance), and democratic practice. Democratic practice is used throughout the book to encompass the ability of an active public-at-large to influence democratic institutions so that these respond to public values. Democratic practice – which Drèze and Sen hold to be importantly distinct from institutions yet influenced by them and able in turn to influence them – is discussed in greatest detail of the three. It is, they argue, the area in which India needs the greatest strengthening.

The barriers to the full exercise of democratic practice are several; Drèze and Sen name three: dysfunctional or corrupt institutions that prevent it (electoral fraud); inadequately skilled or motivated citizens; and powerful social inequalities (or special interests) that usurp common agendas and render democratic practice ineffective. “At the risk of some oversimplification, the foundations of democratic practice may, thus, be described as facility (functional democratic institutions), involvement (informed public engagement with these institutions), and equity (a fair distribution of power).” These foundations are discussed together with the situations that threaten them. In particular, the pernicious effects of social and economic inequality, and of power imbalances, emerge as highly significant: “The central relevance of equity arises from the fact that a fair distribution of power is a basic—indeed fundamental—requirement of democracy.”

In *Hunger and Public Action*, *Poverty and Famine*, public participation entered the discussion largely – although not entirely by any means – because it was instrumental to obtaining desired outcomes. *India: Development and Participation* continued to make a strong case for the instrumental value of democratic practice in supporting the policies required to address deprivations and spur development. The fundamental orientation of the book was to enquire what human agency could do collectively to improve the quality of people’s lives, given that their lives are greatly influenced by the world around.

The world ‘social’ in the expression ‘social opportunity’ (extensively used in the first edition of this book), is a useful reminder not to view individuals and their opportunities in isolated terms. The options that a person has depend greatly on relations with others and on what the state and other institutions do. We shall be particularly concerned with those opportunities that are strongly influenced by social circumstances and public policy, especially those relating to education, health, nutrition, social equity, civil liberties, and other basic aspects of the quality of life.

The approach taken in *India: Development and Participation* also supplemented the instrumental approach, by appreciating the intrinsic and the constitutive values of democratic practice and public participation. These other ways of appreciating the value of agency were also voiced by Sen in other writings as we will see briefly below.

*India: Development and Participation* ends by revisiting the argument of the entire book through the quote of Dr. Ambedkar, the chair of the Constituent Assembly’s Drafting Committee who was responsible in large measure for drafting
the Indian Constitution – a constitution that safeguards many social as well as economic capabilities. He wrote:

On the 26th January 1950 [when the constitution comes into effect], we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality.27

Drèze and Sen argue that India needs to enrich democratic and participatory processes much more in order to face current challenges – social, political, economic, and military – effectively.

These discussions lead the reader to appreciate the considerable power that public action and participation and democratic practice can have, and to regret situations in which this beneficial force does not arise (or is crushed, or merely ignored). But how can this outcry be framed, made, channelled, and what does one do when it does not arise – or arises but does not take root? The next two sections introduce two sets of concepts. The first are related to agency and process freedoms; the second are related to affiliation between people. Then we return to exactly to this question.

INTRINSIC AND CONSTITUTIVE ASPECTS OF DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE

Clearly, in the case of famine, participation and democratic practice have a significant instrumental value in catalyzing an effective response. Yet Sen, as well as Drèze and Sen, have argued that these also have intrinsic and constitutive aspects.28 The intrinsic value of agency is a consistent feature of Sen’s work: “Acting freely and being able to choose are, in this view, directly conducive to well-being, not just because more freedom makes more alternatives available.”29 Participation, being a limited expression of agency, can have a value both as agency on behalf of oneself, and as the power to act on behalf of others to whom one is sympathetic or committed for other reasons.

Participation also has intrinsic value for the quality of life. Indeed being able to do something not only for oneself but also for other members of the society is one of the elementary freedoms which people have reason to value. The popular appeal of social movements in poor communities suggests that this basic capability is highly valued even among people who lead very deprived lives in material terms.30

The important point to note here is that participation on others’ behalf may be valuable to individuals who are – and who are not – directly affected by the concerns against which they act.

Sen also argues that, “the practice of democracy gives citizens an opportunity to learn from one another, and helps society to form its values and priorities… In this sense, democracy has constructive importance.”31 He cites the example of declining fertility rates, which have been “much influenced by public discussion of the bad effects of high fertility rates on the community at large and especially on the lives of young women.”32 Public discussions of family planning (fueled by new information) gradually led to a re-shaping of the values around family and child-bearing. Two aspects influenced this change: new information (learning from one another about family planning, declining infant mortality rates, overpopulation, economic analysis
of alternative family structures) and a critical reflection on values (the value of many children for reasons of status and labor force, in relation to the value of maternal health, and the value of enabling higher aspirations for one’s children). These two aspects may be critical elements to awakening public action of the requisite scale and energy.

SOLIDARITY, IMPERFECT OBLIGATION AND PLURAL AFFILIATION

So, to return to our question, how can public outcry and democratic engagement be encouraged in situations where it may not be in evidence with sufficient force? Clearly the appropriate response will vary considerably depending upon the features of the specific situation. If there is a situation in which decision-makers are all or mainly accountable to the collective, for example, if they come up for re-election, then the mechanism of influence is not terribly mysterious. However in many of the institutions direct accountability links might not pertain or might be fragile. Looking, again, across Sen’s writings, one notes recurrent attention paid to the moral or normative links between the relatively well-off or powerful, and the deprived. These linkages are referred to under different terms: solidarity, imperfect obligation, even the development of plural affiliations. And the relationship between these terms is not altogether transparent. Yet it would seem that one aspect of increasing democratic practice of the sort that generates effective participation will involve a strengthening of these cross-class relationships.

In India: Development and Participation Drèze and Sen discuss the problem of ‘voicelessness’ in which economic and social inequalities prevent “the underprivileged from participating effectively in democratic institutions, and give[s] disproportionate power to those who command crucial resources such as income, education, and influential connections.” 33 They advocate two ways of overcoming voicelessness: “self-assertion … of the underprivileged through political organization,” and “solidarity with the underprivileged on the part of other members of the society, whose interests and commitments are broadly linked, and who are often better placed to advance the cause of the disadvantaged by virtue of their own privileges (e.g. formal education, access to the media, economic resources, political connections).” 34 They argued that both assertion and solidarity may have intrinsic as well as instrumental value.

Within the Indian context, solidarity had been the dominant form of organizing, which had strengths but also weaknesses because the perspectives, motivations and ideologies of those who spoke on behalf of the illiterate or unemployed or malnourished might “not be entirely congruent with the interests of those whom they seek to represent.” 35 And well-meaning but ill-informed solidarity might successfully advocate unhelpful policies – such as the tremendous accumulation of foodgrain stocks, and the left-wing’s support for formal sector labour to the utter neglect of informal workers. Thus solidarity is at once identified as a crucial element for catalysing effective public outcry, at the same time that its limits are exposed and the need for simultaneous development of an assertive voice by the deprived is also stated.
In different texts and settings, Sen regularly argues that more attention needs to be paid not only to human rights – which are tremendously important and require ongoing enthusiasm – but also to what Immanuel Kant called imperfect obligations. These are obligations that are “inexactly specified (telling us neither who must particularly take the initiative, nor how far he should go in doing this general duty).”36 The key feature of imperfect obligations is to draw attention to what one person owes another person by virtue of his or her humanity. This duty is not developed in a strictly legal sense with which the duties correlative to human rights are generally described. It is not specified with reference to a particular person (what I owe Brenda), nor is the content of the obligation specified (what I must do if I encounter an old lady being mugged by a strong assailant). Rather, imperfect obligations are loosely specified duties of others to help a human being who is seen to have certain rights by virtue of his or her humanity - not citizenship. Sen and Anand call imperfect obligations “general and non-compulsive obligations of those who can help.”37 And those who can help certainly include the various individuals who direct systems that need to be modified, as well as those who are directly harmed by unjust systems. Greater attention to imperfect obligations might mean greater legal, public, and moral attention to these vague sets of duties, with the aim of awakening within more and more people an awareness of their imperfect obligations – presumably towards the deprived and threatened among others – and a willingness to respond.

In a different set of writings – these focusing on culture and identity – Sen argues powerfully for our ability to have plural affiliations with different groups – including groups that cross national borders – and of the potent effect these affiliations could have in furthering global justice. How does this argument connect to the topic at hand?

Asked about what the domain of justice should be, Sen answers that to confine the domain of justice to the nation-state, to citizens bound by the national identity, was too specific. And yet to universalise the domain of justice to all of humanity was too idealistic. Instead, Sen argues that our goal should be to extend the domain of justice beyond our national identity by realising that our sense of affiliation to other people travels along our other identities – of gender, of sports, of religious affiliation, of political views, of passionate interests. The domain of justice extends when we recognise our plural affiliation with many identity groups in addition to our nationality.

The assumption here seems to be that the affiliation generates the kind of moral sensitivities and/or solidarity required for comfortably-off people to advance the well-being of the deprived – and perhaps to recognise injustice. For example some, such as John Finnis, argue that fairness is, partly accomplished not by rational deliberation but by a feeling.38 And thus affiliation might, imperfectly, catalyse the ‘feeling’ required to recognise situations of injustice and respond to them.

The development of bonds of affiliation could occur among groups in global civil society – as is seen in transnational social movements for example. But such bonds might also involve persons inside the very institutions which are argued to be unjust. Thus a further, partial, response to structural injustice would be to enable those who are in the institutions to be exposed to others, to develop affiliation with them, and hope that these frail bonds of relationship would be sufficiently tensile to urge the person(s) to reflect on their institutions from within the Trojan horse, as it were, and to change those aspects of them that are particularly grievous.
Of course advocating ‘solidarity’, the fulfilling of ‘imperfect obligations’ and increasing bonds of ‘plural affiliation’ is a very incomplete way of addressing structural injustice. It sounds quite fragile and unlikely. In fact, one would hardly pause to consider it, were it not the case that so often it appears to be precisely a lack of “fellow-feeling” which impedes the further actions that would be required to redress structural injustice. The following section will, in a non-technical manner, sketch how these processes might unfold.

STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

The argument’s in Drèze and Sen’s *Hunger and Public Action*, or in Cornia and Stewart’s *Structural Adjustment with a Human Face* or Stiglitz’ *Globalization and its Discontents* and similar popular writings create an impact by drawing attention to the deepening of poverty and other social ills that policies caused unnecessarily. They awaken indignation precisely because they portray institutions as culpably negligent of (or indifferent to) the human cost of their actions. They do this by attempting to establish not only the seriousness of the harm, but also the causal responsibility of the institution for the harm (directly or through negligence) - links that are often energetically disputed by the accused institution. Finally, they try to establish that the institution, differently constructed, could undertake constructive work without these costs (obviously the prior assumption is that the institution is doing some constructive work).

Thus conceived, an identifying feature of structural injustice is that it unnecessarily excludes attention to certain capabilities or to the capabilities of a group of people, and that this exclusion proves detrimental to them – they become famine victims or suffer from hunger and other acute deprivations. Let us call this group ‘Affected persons’.

But structural injustice can also be analysed in other ways. People whose own lives are not directly affected by exploitation, human rights abuse, abysmal poverty, or environmental degradation, may still be affected by these things indirectly. Their well-being would expand if they had the freedom to live in a world less shadowed by human pain. This is related to the argument of sympathy, where the wellbeing of person Y – be it one’s son or distant strangers, has a direct influence on the wellbeing of person X. Let us call this group ‘Compassionate bystanders’.

Other people may value the capability to work to change such structural injustices in an informed and effective manner. Given an impending famine, the ability to be a part of a movement that rolled back the dread of hunger, for example, could be meaningful and valuable to people, even though it does not directly affect their well-being and in fact may diminish it in some respects. This is related to what Adam Smith called commitment – which entails the choice of actions which may or may not expand one’s self interest. Of course persons’ own motivations and precise goals will always vary both by person and over time. But when the goals intersect sufficiently on a common purpose, we might call this group ‘Committed activists’ – be they neighbours or global activists.
Finally, recall that in this very rough account of structural injustice, multiple agents coordinate joint action, the fruit of which is unjust. In this account some group of people has the power to affect the institutions and policies in significant ways if they were so inclined. That is, they have a rather super-charged set of agency freedoms. These may be special interest groups, or they may be leaders of the organization in question or philanthropists or political leaders. Some ways of addressing the structural injustice will not be successful unless some or many within this group change their view, whether their reasons for doing so relate to incentives, moral sensibilities, or new information. We'll call this group ‘Partially decisive powerbrokers’.

A further clarification in this very rough setting of the table is to note the obvious: the groups are likely to overlap. Person X may be directly impacted by chronic hunger (Affected person), but also devastated when his child perishes in infancy (Compassionate bystander). Yet he may still rise to his feet and use all his strength to mobilize for change so that others in his community do not experience a similar fate (Committed activist). Or, at the other end of the spectrum, Person T may be a vice president in an offending institution (Partially decisive powerbroker), yet be quite committed to using her post to bring about positive change (Committed activist). She may also occasionally become overtaken by depression about the damage her institution continues to inflict (Compassionate bystander).

From this set up it is possible to frame a step-wise participatory response to the capability deprivation among ‘Affected Persons’ – those affected, for example, by famine or hunger. Recall that in this schema structural injustice is distinct from other forms of personal injustice because the actor is multiple rather than unitary – a firm, a government, a policy that is made by some and carried out by many others, a group of vested interests that conspire. Multiple agents frame the actions that, deliberately or unintentionally, create and sustain an unjust system. Hence the dubious value of your lecture to the Trojan horse.

If this system of hunger is to be reversed, then multiple agents will need to recognise a problem, agree, and act to rearrange matters. The persons who are committed to such action are the Committed activists. Therefore, a first step might be an effort to recruit members from the Affected persons, the Compassionate bystanders, or the Partially decisive powerbrokers, who were also simultaneously sincerely Committed activists. When these activists make their voices heard, the outcry and reasoned debate might have a further constructive impact on the values of other Partially decisive powerbrokers, and these persons might, also, become sincerely Committed activists. This is what Sen calls the ‘self-assertion’ and ‘solidarity’ ways of expanding voice.

At the same time, the Affected persons, the Compassionate bystanders, and the Committed activists might work to threaten the ongoing existence of person x’s status as a powerbroker by various assertive means (e.g. if x were not re-elected, x would not be able to enjoy the present super-charged capabilities). Thus unless person x acts as if she or he is also a Committed activist, her status as a powerbroker is in danger. In this way, the group of persons who act as if they are Committed activists (whether sincerely or because their status as powerbrokers depends upon it) might increase, and thus the likelihood of adequate responses by the drivers of the
Trojan horse might increase correspondingly. Of course there are many further complications, yet this might be one way of interpreting the contribution that collective action can make to combating structural injustice.

CONCLUSION: THE EMBEDDED COLLECTIVE ACTION PROBLEM

This paper has sketched the trajectory of Sen’s writings on public responses to structural injustice. It is a very heartening and empowering framework. Indeed, it is also a call to action. As the main points were summarized at the beginning, I will not do so again.

Rather, I would like to conclude by re-examining the coordination problem within the Trojan horse that was raised in the introduction. For the trajectory just sketched left the multiple, partially decisive powerbrokers, as it were, still inside the dark beast, with a goodly number of them more committed to confronting structural injustice (for various reasons) than they were before.

Is this sufficient? For is it not the case that quite often many employees of an unjust institution do indeed see the wrong that is about them, and are distressed by it? They already have the bonds of affiliation tugging away, and would work as Committed activists if it were clear what to do. So why do various structural injustices persist?

It would seem that in the case of structural injustice, a further question to explore is how multiple agents justify inaction. At some times it might indeed be a lack of knowledge about the consequences of their actions to all parties involved – a lack of knowledge that public action could redress. At other times, even with full knowledge of these consequences, the moral sensibilities are not awakened, perhaps because the person does not have bonds of affiliation, or understand how they are ‘imperfectly obligated’ to respond to others. Here too, we have something to suggest. Yet still other times inaction seems to arise – among very committed agents – by a sense of disempowered fatalism, because joint coordinated action would be required in order to bring about systemic change, but they do not know who else would be willing to undertake this with them, or because the tradition of their community does not support this mode of action. Any single agent might excuse their inaction on many grounds – but the perceived disinterest of their colleagues and peers often ranks first among reasons.

Put differently, even if many or even all of the powerbrokers also became Committed activists, this would not necessarily solve the problem. Many structural injustices are widely and publicly recognised (environmental issues, institutional inefficiencies or inertia to name a few). But people – including amiable staff of these institutions (which might include the World Bank or the United Nations) – feel powerless to effect change. The ‘system’ or institution seems too big to respond to the actions of even a large and powerful subset of ‘powerbrokers’, or they are not sure of what an adequate set of responses would be, or lack the confidence that they can change their institution, or do not know how to organize themselves as committed powerbrokers after they have identified one another.
Sen’s work addresses one collective action problem, namely the problem of how affected groups, bystanders, and Committed activists can recruit the commitment of powerbrokers to address the injustice. He argues that they can, and that they must, and identifies several ways of proceeding. However even if successful, it leaves unaddressed a further collective action problem embedded in current institutional arrangements. This problem is how to activate committed powerbrokers to use their agency freedoms to galvanize actions that redress structural injustice, as they may wish to do.

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NOTES

1 I am grateful for the comments of Séverine Deneulin and Nicholas Sagovsky on a previous draft of this paper. Errors remain my own.
9 Hunger and Public Action, 5-6.
11 Hunger and Public Action, 27.
12 Poverty and Famines, 43.
14 Ibid, 18.
15 The book uses the term ‘public action’ to encompass action by the state as well as action undertaken by the public-at-large, including adversarial protests, informed criticisms, and political demands.
16 Ibidem, 263.

18 Hunger and Public Action, 269.

19 Ibidem, 279.


21 Ibidem, 347.

22 Ibidem, 353.

23 Ibidem, 353ff. See also pages 8-9, 28-32.

24 Ibidem, 6.


27 Quoted in India: Development and Participation, 375.

28 See also Valuing Freedoms, chapter 4.


30 India: Economic Development and Social Opportunities, 106. See also India: Development and Participation, 9: “The ability of people to participate in social decisions has been seen, particularly since the French revolution, as a valuable characteristic of a good society.”

31 “Democracy as Universal Value”, 10. See also India: Development and Participation, 10: Participation also plays a crucial role in the formation of values and in generating social understanding.”

32 “Democracy as Universal Value”, 11.

33 India: Development and Participation, 28.

34 Ibidem, 29.


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