

Connected by Commitment.
Rethinking Relations of Oppression and Our Responsibility to Undermine Them

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Book Abstract

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Connected by Commitment examines our responsibility for structural oppression. Although oppression is acknowledged as a serious form of injustice and the responsibility to address injustice is receiving increased attention, there has been little discussion of the responsibility to transform structural oppression.

The book makes three contributions to this discussion. Methodologically, it links normative discussions to social-theoretical accounts of oppressive structures. Substantively, it analyses three types of social relations that are home to oppression. Conceptually, it offers commitment as a novel concept for understanding obligations.

Methodologically, I am guided by the belief that we should link the *normative* question of our responsibility to transform oppressive structures to the *descriptive, social theoretical* question of how these structures endure. Only by understanding this social reality will we be able to find possibilities for transformative action. This distinguishes my approach from the tendency to see our everyday implication in oppressive structures as a *barrier* to the possibility of transformation. This tendency is responsible for “the circle of powerlessness and denial,” the individual attitude to see oneself as either powerless or not responsible for changing oppressive structures. The first step in breaking this circle, I argue, is to recognize the *transformative potential* of our everyday implication in oppression: as our actions support structures, we have the power to change our actions and thus weaken structures.

Substantively, the book offers an analysis of social relations that links their oppressive potential to the possibilities of collective transformative action inherent in them. Within this conception of social relations, I develop the concept of commitment and argue that it is superior to its traditional counterparts (contract, natural duty of justice, complicity) for understanding the ground and form of our obligations to transform oppressive structures because it underscores the cumulative aspect of action.

Chapter One develops the concept of commitment. It uncovers our descriptive and normative understanding of long-term personal relationships such as close friendships and spousal relations, and argues that these relationships are best understood as commitments, which I define as relationships of obligations agents create through their voluntary actions but without knowing in advance the precise content of their obligations. Commitments take shape as the accumulated effect, over time, of open-ended actions and responses.

Chapter Two extends the concept of commitment from personal to social structural relations. It gives meaning to the idea that our implication in social structures puts us in relations analogous to commitment relations and shows the transformative potential of this view. I illustrate this idea with the example of a woman who attempts to change the gendered nature of parenting by changing her everyday actions, thus demanding a similar response from the other parents. This type of action is able, over time, to change the norms of parenting in virtue of their cumulative effects, not in virtue of their intentions. This view of social structures as commitments is a way to reimagine collective action, and an antidote against the familiar powerlessness we experience in this relation for two reasons. First, because it underscores the fact that structures are of our own making and within our power to change. Secondly, because rather than requiring us to single-handedly bring about just institutions, this change requires us to contribute to a collective effort by building on and responding to each other's actions.

Chapters Three through Five advance this argument by analyzing three sorts of social relations vulnerable to oppression: legal relations, intimate relations of care, and work relations. Each of these practices makes us vulnerable to one another, and this vulnerability is at the root of their potential for oppression. At a fundamental level, we are vulnerable because we are social beings; we need and rely on each other. Mutual vulnerability is the flipside of mutual need. This mutual vulnerability is neither good nor bad. However, when it is disproportionately placed on one social group it becomes oppressive. Processes that disproportionately place this mutual vulnerability on disadvantaged social groups make the full effort required to maintain social practices invisible and assign the effort made-invisible to disadvantaged social groups. Understanding social relations as commitments is critical in making this vulnerability visible, thus undermining these processes because they are enabled by the cumulative character of the action that maintains structures.

Thus, Chapter Three argues that laws are one medium through which we are connected to each other, a connection obscured by a belief that laws protect individuals from each other by insulating us from each other. While laws are meant to protect us from our vulnerability to other people's power, this protective function is wrongly understood as *erasing* this vulnerability. The vulnerability resurfaces precisely in the processes through which laws fulfill their protective function – in their interpretation, enforcement and institutionalization. These processes institute or maintain hierarchical or non-hierarchical relations along gender, racial or class lines. Law's protective function should be understood in terms of the quality of the social relations laws sustain. They protect us when they create non-hierarchical social relations. When they support social hierarchies they are instruments of oppression. Commitment is essential for capturing our relation to the laws and to each other as subjects to the same laws because processes of interpretation, enforcement and institutionalization depend on the cumulative aspect of action. This view of laws explains the continuities between protest and disobedience, and makes visible the many possibilities of action that can correct the oppressive character of laws.

Chapter Four argues that the sphere of intimate care, that takes shape around the practice of attending to each other's needs, puts us in each other's power. Providing care requires a distinctive set of skills, which I call "skills of flexibility," because needs make demands at times that cannot be easily foreseen, change over time and need interpretation. Under current social arrangements and understandings of value, the effort required to exercise these skills is made invisible, and thus a mutual condition of vulnerability is disproportionately placed on caregivers, who are put at risk of oppression.

I criticize proposals to replace marriage law with legal protections for adults' choice because it does not adequately protect caregivers from this risk. Marriage law reform should instead be guided by the notion of commitment that, by making flexibility visible, would legitimate public and private support for caregivers.

Chapter Five argues that work makes us vulnerable to those whose labor is presupposed by ours. This mutual vulnerability is denied in the hierarchical division between high and low-skilled labor, which makes invisible not only the full value of "low-skilled" work, but also the part of the value of the products of labor that can only be created collectively, because it requires the combination of qualitatively different skills. These processes enable capitalist accumulation, which shows that the division between low and high-skilled labor benefits capital accumulation, not, as Iris Young argues, high-skilled professional workers. This conclusion gains further support from the theoretical and empirical evidence of Thomas Piketty's study of inequality. The vast majority of workers, with the exception of "supermanagers," share an interest in limiting capitalist accumulation. Labor unions should organize around this interest, not be reduced to protections against "bosses." These shared interests are obscured by ideas of personal achievement and rights as boundaries. The notion of commitment is critical in undermining these ideas and showing how a common interest can arise out of different activities and positions in the practice of work. It should guide labor unions, which should protect the collective interest of labor against unrestrained capitalist accumulation, not the interests of nonprofessional workers against managers.