

## Responsibility and Global Labor Justice\*

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Socrates thought that, for the agent himself, doing wrong is more harmful than suffering wrong. Well, so long as it is merely a matter of ‘wrong’ done or suffered, thus a matter essentially existing in the perception of the parties, the proposition may stand. . . . But the *objectified* wrong creates a new, external causality, and we are inquiring about *its* moral harm to the suffering side. And we ask the question not, as Socrates did, for the single actions committed and suffered here and there, but for the constant effects on the victims of a *system* of justice. And there the main point is that, in a system of ruthless exploitation, those objective effects mean abject poverty with all the degradation, external and internal, which this entails. – Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*

**D**O people in relatively free and affluent countries such as the United States, Canada or Germany have responsibilities to try to improve working conditions and wages of workers in far-off parts of the world who produce items those in the more affluent countries purchase? In recent years the “anti-sweatshop” movement has gained momentum with arguments that at least some agents in these relatively free and affluent countries do have such responsibilities. They have held rallies and press conferences, staged sit-ins and hunger strikes, all with the aim of convincing consumers, corporate executives, union members, municipal governments, students, and university administrators in the United States or Europe to acknowledge a responsibility with respect to the working conditions of distant workers in other countries, and to take actions to meet such responsibilities.

Those to whom these appeals are made often find them absurd. We who go to work and school here in Chicago have no connection to workers in Bangkok or Manila or Tegucigalpa. However awful the conditions under which they work, we have not caused them, and we are not in control of the factors that would

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remedy them. Thus it makes no sense to claim that we have moral responsibilities to try to change them. In this article I theorize a conception of responsibility that can make sense of the claims of the anti-sweatshop movement, or indeed, any claims of responsibility that members of a society might be said to have toward harms and injustices of distant strangers. Objectors to the anti-sweatshop movement are right to argue that these claims make little sense within a dominant conception of responsibility as liability. I propose and elaborate a different conception of responsibility, political responsibility, to correspond to these claims.

## I. CLAIMS OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR WORKING CONDITIONS

Many of the goods sold by some of the most high-profile retailers in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Japan and Germany are made in small factories far away in the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Guatemala, and other countries whose governments offer tax and other incentives to foreign investors. Others are manufactured in small production facilities in the United States employing immigrants. The American or Japanese brand name companies rarely operate the factories themselves, but rather place highly specified orders with other companies, who themselves often contract out the work to local entrepreneurs. Education and publicity about conditions under which much apparel sold in affluent countries is made in less developed countries has led to awareness that similar conditions in often illegally operating apparel manufacturing facilities exist in many cities closer to home—in Chicago, Los Angeles or New York, for example. The arguments I make here about responsibility apply to relations between strangers in the same country or city as much as transnationally. They are part of a connected global apparel industry system that produces both. In this paper I nevertheless concentrate the argument on transnational connection, because many people question that responsibility extends so far.

It is not hyperbole to label these factories “sweatshops.” The vast majority of garment workers worldwide are women, often young women, who are readily accessible and relatively pliant from the employers’ point of view. Shifts are commonly at least ten hours, six days a week, and forced overtime is common. Factories usually have strict rules, which often include restrictions on talking and going to the bathroom, and supervisors are often abusive as a matter of policy. Working conditions are often dangerous, with poorly ventilated, overheated spaces and little protective equipment. Women workers often suffer sexual harassment or verbal abuse. Workers who protest their exploitation or attempt to organize unions are typically intimidated, beaten, or fired. Wages for these workers are often below the local legal minimum wage, and even when they are not, the wages fall below what the workers need for subsistence. Health benefits and pension plans are a fantastic dream, and there is no job security. Indeed, workers are often defined as temporary workers just so their employers can

legally escape the requirements of labor laws. According to a report from the International Labor Organization, dozens of millions of workers worldwide toil under such conditions.<sup>1</sup>

In the mid 1990s in the United States and Europe, activists began campaigns targeted at consumers of some of these products, to urge them to think about these far-away workers, not buy the products, and put pressure on the retailers that contracted their manufacture to change the working conditions. Leafleting and demonstrations at outlets of Gap, Disney, Nike and Victoria's Secret caught the attention of some activists and consumers, and eventually succeeded in moving corporate leaders to take some actions in response, although some have described these as cosmetic. Initially, however, the global companies' response was to deny responsibility for the workers, saying that they did not themselves operate the factories in which the goods were produced.

In the meantime, students at colleges and universities raised questions about the conditions under which the garments worn by their sports teams and sold in their bookstores are made. They called upon their university administrations to terminate contracts with sportswear companies that refused to take responsibility for such conditions. The height of the student anti-sweatshop movement came during the 1999–2000 academic year, when student groups on hundreds of campuses held rallies and campus education events, occupied administration buildings and staged hunger strikes. Most of the student groups were demanding that their universities join the Workers' Rights Coalition, a student-initiated independent organization to monitor working conditions in apparel factories overseas, and to put pressure on manufacturers to change poor conditions. Many students and college administrators responded to these demands with incredulity.<sup>2</sup> It is not the business of universities and their students to get involved in labor regulation, especially of conditions so remote. We are not the cause of the injustice the workers suffer, and we do not control those who are. The owners and managers of the factories clearly have a primary responsibility for the treatment workers receive, the hours they are required to work, their wages and benefits, and the safety of the work environment. They make specific cost minimization decisions that result in sweatshop conditions, they make the rules that prohibit bathroom breaks or days off, they lock the doors and verbally abuse the workers, they or those they hire threaten and beat workers who try to organize unions. If there are any agents to *blame* for the plight of these workers, surely the owners and managers must be first in line. Inasmuch as its primary recommendation for action to improve the workers'

<sup>1</sup>For an account of working conditions, see Ellen Israel Rosen, *Making Sweatshops: The Globalization of the U.S. Apparel Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), ch. 2; Edna Bonacich and Richard P. Appelbaum, *Behind the Label: Inequality in the Los Angeles Apparel Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), esp. ch. 6; Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (New York: Picador, 1999), esp. ch. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Lisa Fetherstone, *Students Against Sweatshops* (London: Verso, 2000).

situation is that universities and corporations should monitor factory conditions and pressure the owners and managers to change their policies, the anti-sweatshop movement recognizes that those agents have a direct responsibility.

Such a rejection of movement claims of the responsibility of university administrators and consumers assumes a liability model of responsibility. On the liability model, it is indeed implausible to hold these remote agents responsible for the workers' situation. The anti-sweatshop movement must implicitly be relying on another conception of responsibility. My project here is to construct a conception of responsibility that corresponds to their intuitions, which I call political responsibility. My argument is not that the concept of political responsibility should replace that of a fault or liability model, but should supplement that model in analyses of responsibility in relation to structural processes.

The most common model of assigning responsibility derives from legal reasoning to find guilt or fault for a harm. Under the fault model, one assigns responsibility to particular agents whose actions can be shown as causally connected to the circumstances for which responsibility is sought. This agent can be a collective entity, such as a corporation, but when it is that entity can be treated as a single agent for the purposes of assigning responsibility.<sup>3</sup> The actions found causally connected to the circumstances are shown to be voluntary. If a candidate for responsibility can successfully show that their causal relation to the circumstances was not voluntary, that they were coerced or otherwise did not evince free choice, then their responsibility is usually mitigated if not dissolved. When these conditions do exist, however, it is appropriate to blame the agents for the harmful circumstances. A concept of strict liability departs from a fault or blame model in that it holds a person liable for an action that caused a harm even if they did not intend the outcome, or holds a person or institution liable for a harm caused by someone under their command.<sup>4</sup> I include both fault liability and strict liability in the liability model of responsibility, because they share other features that I will use to distinguish this model from the model of political responsibility. The liability model is primarily backward-looking in its purpose; it reviews the history of events in order to assign responsibility, often for the sake of exacting punishment or compensation. Assigning responsibility to some agents, on this model, finally, usually also has the function of absolving other agents who might have been candidates for fault. To find this person or group of persons guilty of a crime usually implies that others who were accused are not guilty.

<sup>3</sup>See Peter French, *Collective and Corporate Responsibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

<sup>4</sup>On concepts of fault and liability see, for example, Joel Feinberg, "Collective responsibility," *Doing and Deserving: Essays in the Theory of Responsibility* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 222–51; Tony Honoré, "Responsibility and luck: the moral basis of strict liability," *Responsibility and Fault* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 14–40.

Because their decisions and actions are the immediate and repeated cause of factory conditions, the owners and managers of these factories are certainly the prime candidate for blame if these conditions violate minimal standards of decency and human rights. Local firms that directly buy from these enterprises, who presumably are the most likely to know about such violations, probably should also be held responsible. When confronted with accusations that they wrongly exploit and oppress their workers, however, some of these agents are likely to try to mitigate their responsibility by appeal to factors outside their control. They may claim that they have little choice about the wages they pay, and cannot afford to give workers time off or invest in better ventilation and equipment. They operate in a highly competitive environment, they say, where other operators constantly try to undercut them. They can stay in business only by selling goods at or below the prices of worldwide competitors, and they can do that only by keeping labor and other production costs to a minimum. Apparel dealers who sell to American wholesalers are looking for the best deal, and they will take their business elsewhere if these employers raise their prices. Surely it cannot be better for the workers that they have no job at all, these employers are likely to claim.<sup>5</sup>

Such an appeal to mitigating circumstances can only go so far, of course. No employer can legitimately excuse making people work sixteen-hour days, refusing them bathroom breaks, or beating them, as necessary for keeping the costs of production competitive. Nevertheless, there is a good measure of truth to the claim that these employers themselves operate under considerable constraints. Many of these factories do operate on the edge of solvency, in a highly competitive environment. Under such circumstances of anarchistic competition, labor rights advocates might turn to the states in whose jurisdictions the factories operate.

A typical justification for state-enforced labor standards appeals to the need to maintain a level playing field among competitors. If there is a human rights floor below which wages and working conditions should not be allowed to fall, the state is the proper agent to guarantee such a floor through regulation. In this way those employers who wish to be decent to workers need not fear being undersold by more unscrupulous employers.

Certainly the states in which sweatshops operate must be blamed for allowing them to exist. Many of these state agencies are inept and corrupt, and often enough some of their officials directly profit from the system that exploits their poor compatriots. As the movement uncovers sweatshops in the United States and other states with supposedly high labor standards and good enforcement processes, it should certainly blame these agencies for not doing their jobs.

Some states not unreasonably say, however, that they themselves are under severe constraints that prevent them from improving working conditions. Many

<sup>5</sup>See Rosen, *Making Sweatshops*, ch. 11 and Bonacich and Appelbaum, *Behind the Label*, chs 2 and 5 for an account of constraints on actors in the system.

governments of less developed countries have indirectly encouraged these very practices by constituting special export processing zones whose factories are exempt from taxation and regulation that apply to other enterprises in the country. We desperately need investment and jobs, they say. To get them we are forced to compete with other poor states to promote a “favorable” investment climate, which includes low taxes and minimal regulation. To avoid or pay down balance of trade deficits they need companies that produce for export. They have never had a strong enough public sector properly to monitor and enforce compliance with their regulations, and it is difficult to create one with their low tax base. Their bureaucrats and inspectors are overworked and underpaid themselves, and thus easily succumb to bribe offers. Pressures for reduced public spending by international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund have further weakened public sector capacity.

Owners, managers and local states are the agents that should be held liable for superexploitative and oppressive working conditions in which many items consumed by people in North America and Europe are produced. When these agents claim that they operate under constraints beyond their control that give them few options to operate factories differently, however, there is some basis for their excuses. They point to structural economic and political processes involving actors and institutions both inside and outside the countries that host the factories, whose processes and effects both enable and provide incentives for some actions at the same time as they block or constrain alternatives. The factories where the workers labor operate within a dense system of investment, production, credit, exchange and profit which connect direct producers to far away consumers, and link local brokers and middlemen to multinational corporate marketing plans. Activists in the anti-sweatshop movement claim that we relatively affluent people in the global North share responsibility for the fate of the faraway workers because these structural processes connect us to them. What does such connection mean and why does it bring responsibilities? What is the nature of these responsibilities? In the next section I will build on analyses some moral theorists of international justice have offered of transnational connection that bring with them moral responsibilities. Then I will explain how these are political responsibilities, as distinct from liabilities, and explain differences in these two concepts of responsibility. In the final section I will explain how the model of political responsibility might be applied to reasoning about how particular agents should respond to structural injustices.

## II. INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE

Activists' claims that university administrators, corporate executives, students and consumers in Europe and North America have responsibilities toward workers in faraway lands excite controversy partly because they presuppose a strong notion of moral responsibility between agents in different nations

and political communities. Many people reject the idea of such transnational responsibilities, believing that the requirement to rectify injustice toward others extends only to those who live within the same political jurisdiction and/or share a sense of common national membership. Are there grounds for the assumption that some obligations of justice extend globally and that therefore better-off people in some parts of the world have responsibilities toward globally worse-off people wherever they are? I will build on arguments of Onora O'Neill and Thomas Pogge that there are.<sup>6</sup>

Onora O'Neill argues that the scope of an agent's moral obligation extends to all those whom the agent assumes in conducting his or her activity. Each of us acts according to interests and goals we set within the frame of specific institutions and practices, within which we know others act. Our actions are partly based on the actions of others, insofar as we depend on them to carry out certain tasks, and/or insofar as our general knowledge of what other people are doing enable us to formulate expectations and predictions about events and institutional outcomes that affect us or condition our actions. In today's world of globalized markets, interdependent states, rapid and dense communication, the scope of the actors we implicitly assume in many of our actions is often global. The social relations that connect us to others are not restricted to nation-state borders. Our actions are conditioned by and contribute to institutions that affect distant others, and their actions contribute to the operation of institutions that affect us. Because our actions assume these others as a condition for our own actions, O'Neill argues, we have made practical moral commitments to them by virtue of our actions.

While it is not possible to trace how each person's actions produce specific effects on others, because there are too many mediating actions and events, we have obligations to those who condition and enable our own actions, as they do on us. There is an asymmetry in these obligations, however, O'Neill argues, insofar as some people are rendered more vulnerable to coercion, domination or deprivation by the institutional relations. While everyone in the system of structural and institutional relations stands in circumstances of justice that give them obligations with respect to all the others, those institutionally and materially situated to be able to do more to affect the conditions of vulnerability have greater obligations.<sup>7</sup>

Important for O'Neill's analysis and the use I want to make of it, these presuppositions of activity need not be present to an agent's consciousness in order to hold as assumptions. These relationships are objective. Although most of us are often unaware of or indifferent to the situation of those whose activities

<sup>6</sup>I have discussed the same authors' arguments at some more length and in a wider context of global justice in *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), ch. 7.

<sup>7</sup>Onora O'Neill, *Faces of Hunger* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985); *Towards Justice and Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 99; compare Robert Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

condition our own options for action, this does not erase the potential obligations we have toward these others. It is not uncommon for agents to deny the connection to others their actions assume, but such efforts at bad faith are pragmatically inconsistent. If I implicitly depend on anonymous others to fulfill their roles or occupy their statuses as I conduct my business, I cannot deny this connection if they should make claims upon me to redress injustices they claim to suffer in the institutions we inhabit together. Moral critique of both individuals and institutions consists to a significant extent in bringing to consciousness the assumptions about others that agents make in their activities, and exposing the inconsistency between these assumptions and the denials of connection.<sup>8</sup>

This method of discovering responsibility to others applies easily to the context of apparel purchase. When I buy a sweatshirt or a pair of shoes, my action presupposes the actions of all the persons connected with the process that transforms raw materials into clothes and brings them to my local store. When I look for low-priced clothes, I presuppose the actions of those who make decisions to minimize costs of production, decisions like failing to equip garment factories with smoke detectors and sprinklers. On O'Neill's account, because I am connected to all these people through my consumer actions, I have obligations of justice toward them. I cannot escape these obligations by claiming that I have not participated in design of the relations of production and distribution, nor by saying that I do not know where or who all these people are. I know that they are others elsewhere, that I am connected with them in these institutions and processes, and that especially workers in these processes are vulnerable to harm from employers and others. My first responsibility may be to acquire more specific knowledge. As I will discuss shortly, I share responsibility with the many others who also contribute by their actions to the processes that connect us. Just because I cannot disentangle my particular actions from the complex process in which some people are made particularly vulnerable to deprivation or domination, to identify which specific actions of mine affect which specific individuals in particular ways, I have a relation of responsibility to the process itself.

Charles Beitz and Thomas Pogge also offer accounts of the bases of a claim that people within one nation–state have responsibilities of justice toward many people in other nation–states. People in relatively affluent countries act within a transnational system of interdependence and dense economic interaction, which has systemic consequences for the relative privilege and disadvantage that people experience in different parts of the world or within particular locales. The grounds of moral responsibility lie neither in political structures of the nation–state nor in people's awareness and affirmation of a connection to others, but in the objective systemic institutional relations in which they dwell together

<sup>8</sup>*Towards Justice and Virtue*, ch. 4.



with distance to others. Pogge in particular argues that persons who live in more affluent industrial parts of the world act within a common institutional scheme with persons who live in less industrialized parts of the world.

The global poor live within a world wide states system based on internationally recognized territorial domains, interconnected through a global network of market trade and diplomacy. The presence and relevance of shared institutions is shown by how dramatically we affect the circumstances of the global poor through investments, loans, trade, brides, military aid, sex tourism, culture exports and much else. Their very survival often crucially depends on our consumption choices, which may determine the price of their foodstuffs and their opportunity to find work. . . . This does not mean that we should hold ourselves responsible for the remoter effects of our economic decisions. . . . But we must be concerned with how the rules structuring international interactions foreseeable affect the incidence of extreme poverty.<sup>9</sup>

Later I will argue that some of Pogge's formulations of the moral relationships between such agents in the global North and some of the world's poor and working people are somewhat misleading.

To summarize so far, these philosophers theorize a complex set of structural relations across the globe which condition the material circumstances and possibilities for action of most of the world's people. Reciprocal obligations of justice obtain between most if not all of these people not simply because they are human nor because they live under the same political constitution, but because they all depend to some degree on schemes of social cooperation which they presuppose in making their own plans or to which they contribute by their actions. Within this global "basic structure," however, some people have significantly more power than others, not only over the conditions of their own lives, but also over decisions and processes that affect others. Within the structures, furthermore, some people occupy positions of privilege while others are relatively or absolutely deprived.

Samuel Scheffler suggests that facts of global interdependence like these make fundamental features of the common sense conception of responsibility problematic. That common sense conception of responsibility is restrictive; it aims to delimit a relatively circumscribed sphere of circumstances and persons toward which agents have responsibility. This conception tends to restrict responsibility to what individuals themselves do, as opposed to what they fail to prevent. It also tends to restrict responsibility to those persons with whom an agent has special or relatively immediate connection—members of one's family, one's coworkers, one's neighbors, and others with whom one has ongoing interaction.<sup>10</sup> A particular phenomenology of agency underlies this conception

<sup>9</sup>Thomas Pogge, "A universalistic approach to international justice," *Internationale Gerechtigkeit und Interpretation*, ed. Giuseppe Zaccaria (Munich: WT Verlag, 2002), Section 2.1; ed. Charles Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

<sup>10</sup>Scheffler includes members of the same nation-state in the category of these special relationships, but I think this is a mistake.

of responsibility, according to Scheffler, which gives experiential primacy to near effects rather than remote effects of action. When “an outcome is the joint result of the actions of a number of people, including ourselves, we tend to see our own agency as implicated to a much lesser extent than we do when we take an effect to have resulted solely from our own actions.”<sup>11</sup>

This phenomenology of agency and the conception of responsibility it supports, Scheffler argues, does not correspond well to the issues that face moral agents because of the density of communication, economic exchange, technological effects, migration, and political interaction among the world’s people. Because the common sense conception of responsibility, which corresponds in significant ways to what I call the liability model, has little to say in relation to such massive global issues, Scheffler suggests, we are in danger of losing a sense of individuals as bearers of responsibility altogether.

What we appear to lack, in other words, is a set of clear, action-guiding and psychologically feasible principles which would enable individuals to orient themselves in relation to larger processes, and general conformity to which would serve to regulate those processes and their effects in a morally satisfactory way.<sup>12</sup>

I am not convinced that what we need to respond to this predicament is a set of principles to which individuals might look for guidance about what to do in relation to global social processes. Scheffler has nevertheless identified a key problem in contemporary moral theory and practice. People have difficulty reasoning about individual responsibility with relation to outcomes produced by large-scale social structures in which millions participate, but of which none are the sole or primary cause. When these structures are transnational, as many of them are, the difficulty is compounded by a relative lack of regulatory institutions through which these millions might engage in collective action. It is this difficulty that accounts for our continuing to rely solely on a liability model of responsibility for harms, I suggest, as in debates about transnational labor conditions. In the following section I begin to articulate a model of political responsibility which goes some distance toward ways that individuals can think about their responsibilities in relation to global social structures.

### III. POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

I have argued that local owners and managers of factories with superexploitative working conditions should be held responsible for those conditions. Their actions causally contribute most directly to the workers’ situation, and they should be blamed for it. I have also argued, however, that workers, owners

<sup>11</sup>Scheffler, “Individual responsibility in a global age,” *Boundaries and Allegiances: Problems of Responsibility and Justice in Liberal Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 39.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

and even the nation-states that have jurisdiction over them are embedded in transnational economic structures which connect individuals and institutions in faraway corporate boardrooms and retail outlets to them. These structural conditions provide incentives for setting up and buying from manufacturing operations that violate worker rights. Blaming and punishing a few factory owners, while often appropriate, does not remedy the general problem so long as that incentive structure is in place and sanction is not routine. These economic structures constrain the options of owners and managers in the less developed countries, and implicate many others in the world in the processes that produce those constraints. Because of these connections, activists claim that consumers, corporate executives, university administrators and others in Europe, North America, Japan, and other relatively well-off places have responsibilities toward the working conditions of apparel factories in South Asia, Latin America and elsewhere.

This claim only makes sense, I suggested earlier, if the faraway consumers, executives, and administrations bear responsibility in a different sense from the owners and managers of the factories. Earlier I said that the owners and managers are responsible for the working conditions in the sense of liability. The liability model of responsibility causally connects the circumstances for which responsibility is sought with specific actions of particular agents. In this sense the liability model individualizes even when the agent it identifies is a corporate entity. The liability model is backward-looking; it seeks to lay blame for harms that have occurred, often for the sake of exacting punishment or compensation. The many agents whom O'Neill or Pogge would identify as connected with the transnational institutions and structures that help bring sweatshop conditions about have responsibilities for harmful or unjust conditions in a different sense, which I will call *political responsibility*.

Hannah Arendt distinguishes between moral and legal responsibility, on the one hand, which embody what I have called the liability model, and what she calls political responsibility, on the other. On her account, political responsibility is a kind of collective responsibility, and one where the responsibility borne collectively is not dissolvable to the self-conscious collaborative acts of individuals. Whereas responsibility as liability assigns responsibility according to what particular agents have done, on the model of political responsibility individuals are responsible precisely for things they themselves have *not* done. The reason to assume political responsibility involves not individual fault, but derives from "my membership in a group (a collective) which no voluntary act of mine can dissolve, that is, a membership which is utterly unlike a business partnership which I can dissolve at will."<sup>13</sup> Arendt clearly takes the political community of a nation-state as her paradigm of such a collective.

<sup>13</sup>Hannah Arendt, "Collective responsibility," *Amor Mundi: Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt*, ed. James W. Bernauer (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), p. 45.

We can escape this political and strictly collective responsibility only by leaving the community, and since no man can live without belonging to some community, this would simply mean to exchange some community for another and hence one kind of responsibility for another.<sup>14</sup>

As a member of such a political community we are bound to acknowledge that we bear responsibility for things our government does in our name or supposedly on our behalf, even though we ourselves have not done those things, and even though the actions may not be connected to any process of authorization that even indirectly links them to us. Arendt seems to think that being members of a national or political community just in itself is the ground of this responsibility. Along similar lines, some political philosophers as well as many political actors distinguish the kind and level of responsibilities people have in relation to one another precisely on grounds of being members of the same nation–state or not. Whereas people owe only the thinnest form of respect and decency to one another across borders, the fact of shared national membership puts special responsibilities on persons to be concerned for the welfare of their fellow countrymen, and that they live together on terms of justice.

This manner of viewing responsibilities for promoting justice and the wellbeing of others reasons backwards. If there are denser and more demanding responsibilities between members of the same nation–state than between members of faraway societies, this is because the processes and structures in which they are embedded more tightly connect them, and the consequences of their actions affect the more local others than those far away. Common polities form or ought to form in these situations of dense structures in order that people may collectively regulate those interactions in ways they judge most just. The political responsibilities derive, that is, not from the contingent fact of membership in common political institutions. Instead, the political responsibilities derive from the social and economic structures in which they act and mutually affect one another, and political institutions are an important means of their discharging those responsibilities.

Much of the sociological and moral theoretical literature on processes of globalization aims to show that the structural connections among persons in the world have both widened their scope beyond nation–state boundaries and become more dense across these boundaries. To the extent that people here participate in the production and reproduction of structural processes that condition the lives of people far away, however, the sort of political responsibilities that Arendt invokes exist for them in relation to those distant others. While they probably have not intended that the social processes in which they participate and from which they benefit have harmful consequences to

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 47.

others, and they should not be blamed or found guilty for these consequences, they are responsible under a different conception.

Despite my disagreement with Arendt on the question of whether the ground of this form of responsibility lies in being members of the same nation–state, I continue to follow her in labeling this *political* responsibility for the following reasons. As does Arendt in many contexts, I mean by “political” something broader than government. In addition, by politics or the political I am referring to the activity in which people organize collectively to regulate or transform some aspect of their shared social conditions, along with the communicative activities in which they try to persuade one another to join such collective action or decide what direction they wish to take it. The sort of responsibility that anti-sweatshop activists claim that they, their fellow consumers, and specific institutions of manufacture or distribution of goods have is political responsibility in this sense. Now I will detail the features of this conception of responsibility, especially as distinct from the fault or liability model of responsibility.

(1) Unlike a blame model of responsibility, political responsibility does not seek to mark out and isolate those to be held responsible, thereby distinguishing them from others, who by implication then are not responsible. Such isolation of the one liable from the others who are not is an important aspect of legal responsibility, both in criminal and in tort law. Because they argue that organizations or collectives of persons can be blamed for harms, as well as individual persons, most accounts of collective responsibility aim to distinguish those who have done the harm from those who have not.

In the discussion cited above, Arendt says that political responsibility, on the other hand, is a responsibility for what we have *not done*. This may be a mystifying and even misleading way of putting the point, which I take to be the following. Many cases of harms, wrongs or injustice have no isolatable perpetrator, but rather result from the participation of millions of people in institutions and practices that result in harms. Endemic large-scale homelessness in an otherwise affluent society might be an example of such an injustice without an identifiable perpetrator. In many cases where perpetrators of specific crimes can and should be identified, moreover, as in the Nazi Holocaust Arendt has in mind, the makers of genocidal policies and those that directly implement them are enabled and supported by wider social structures in which many participate. I have suggested already that the injustices of inhumane labor conditions should be analyzed on these two levels. In the conception of political responsibility, then, finding that some people bear responsibility for injustice does not necessarily absolve others.

(2) In a liability conception of responsibility, what counts as a wrong for which a perpetrator is sought and for which he or she might be required to compensate, is generally conceived as a deviation from a baseline. Implicitly we assume a normal background situation that is morally acceptable, if not ideal. A crime or

an actionable harm consists in a morally and often legally unacceptable deviation from this background structure.<sup>15</sup> The process that brought about the harm is conceived as a discrete, bounded event that breaks away from the ongoing normal flow. Punishment, redress, or compensation aims to restore normality or to “make whole” in relation to the baseline circumstance.

A concept of political responsibility in relation to structural injustices, on the other hand, evaluates not a harm that deviates from the normal and acceptable, but rather often brings into question precisely the background conditions that ascriptions of blame or fault assume as normal. When we judge that structural injustice exists, we are saying precisely that at least some of the normal and accepted background conditions of action are not morally acceptable. Most of us contribute to a greater or lesser degree to the production and reproduction of structural injustice precisely because we follow the accepted and expected rules and conventions of the communities and institutions in which we act. Usually we enact these conventions and practices in a habitual way, without explicit reflection and deliberation on what we are doing, having in the foreground of our consciousness and intention immediate goals we want to achieve and the particular people we need to interact with to achieve them.

The anti-sweatshop movement well illustrates this challenge to normal structural background conditions. It asks consumers, universities and other institutions that contract with retailers, brand name apparel companies, and many other agents, to reflect morally on the normal and hitherto acceptable market relationships in which they act. It challenges all the agents that are part of the economic chain between the workers who make garments and the people who buy and wear them to bring into question whether “business as usual”, which hitherto has been understood as within the bounds of moral acceptability, should in fact be thought acceptable.

(3) Political responsibility, furthermore, differs from a liability model of responsibility in being more forward-looking than backward-looking. Blame and praise are primarily backward-looking judgments. They refer back to an action or event assumed to have reached its terminus. More often the purpose of assigning responsibility as fault or liability is to sanction, punish or exact compensation from them. To be sure, such backward-looking condemnation and sanction may have a forward-looking purpose; we may wish to deter others from similar action in the future, or we may wish to identify weak points in an institutional system that allows or encourages such blameworthy actions, in order to reform the institutions. Once we take this latter step, however, we have left a liability model and are moving toward a conception of political responsibility. The reform project likely involves responsibilities of many people

<sup>15</sup>See George Fletcher’s discussion of the way that the assignment of criminal liability must distinguish between foregrounded deviations from background conditions assumed as normal. Fletcher, *Basic Concepts of Criminal Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), chs 3 and 4.

to take actions directed at those reforms, even though they are not to blame for past problems.

Political responsibility seeks not to reckon debts, but aims rather to bring about results, and thus depends on the actions of everyone who is in a position to contribute to the results.<sup>16</sup> Taking political responsibility in respect to social structures emphasizes the future more than the past. Because the particular causal relationship of the actions of particular individuals or even organizations to the structural outcomes is often not possible to trace, there may be little point in trying to blame and exact compensation or redress only from a few who have caused the outcome. The point is not to blame people participating in the institutions and structures and produce injustice, because in many cases avoiding such participation is difficult or impossible. Having understood that structural processes cause some injustices, those participating in the production and reproduction of the structures should recognize that their actions contribute along with those of others to this injustice, and take responsibility for altering the processes to avoid or reduce injustice.

Such a project cannot be undertaken, of course, without reflection on the past in a different way. In order to take forward-looking action aimed at changing the way that people's actions in the context of accepted institutional practices contribute to harmful outcomes, we must understand more about how the structural processes work. This usually requires understanding the history of social processes and practices as they have emerged, changed, influenced one another, and often produced unintended outcomes. The primary purpose of such backward-looking analysis in the context of political responsibility, however, is not to debate fault, which can divert those who share political responsibility from the forward-looking tasks of trying to alter the processes.

(4) Political responsibility is relatively open with regard to the actions that count as taking up the responsibility. In this respect, as Joel Feinberg discusses, responsibility is distinct from duty. Like duties, responsibilities carry a burden and an obligation; carrying out responsibilities is not a matter of mere beneficence. Unlike duties, however, responsibilities carry considerable discretion; one *must* carry out one's responsibilities, but *how* one does so is a matter for judgment according to what the responsibilities are for, the capabilities of agents, and the content of action.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Robert Goodin argues that responsibility differs from duty in being more outcome oriented. A duty specifies a rule that an agent should follow. One has fulfilled the duty if one has performed the required actions. Carrying out a responsibility, on the other hand, consists in seeking to bring about a specified outcome. It is very possible to act in accord

<sup>16</sup>See Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 90–120.

<sup>17</sup>Joel Feinberg, "Duties, rights and claims," *Rights, Justice and the Bounds of Liberty* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 137; cited in Larry May, *The Socially Responsible Self: Social Theory and Professional Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 90.

with rules of morality and yet not have discharged one's responsibilities, because one has not achieved the required outcomes even though it is feasible to do so.<sup>18</sup>

(5) Political responsibility, then, is a shared responsibility in specific ways. As Larry May theorizes, the concept of shared responsibility is distinct from the concept of collective responsibility in that the former is a distributed responsibility whereas the latter is not. A collective of persons, such as a corporation, might be said to be responsible for a state of affairs without any of its constituent individuals being responsible as such. Shared responsibility, on the other hand, is a personal responsibility for outcomes or the risks of harmful outcomes, produced by a group of persons. Each is personally responsible for the outcome in a partial way, since he or she alone does not produce the outcomes; the specific part that each plays in producing the outcome cannot be isolated and identified, however, and thus the responsibility is essentially shared.<sup>19</sup>

May's treatment of shared responsibility is largely backward-looking. He reflects on how persons who have not themselves been directly guilty of a harm such as a hate crime may nevertheless contribute by their attitudes and actions to fostering a social environment in which such harms appear more acceptable than they might otherwise. If we follow my claim that political responsibility is more forward-looking than backward-looking, then the shared nature of political responsibility refers primarily to the relationships with others that the responsibility involves. Taking political responsibility means acknowledging that one participates in social processes that have some unjust outcomes, and one participates with many others. Discharging the responsibility entails enjoining collective action with at least some of these others. My responsibility becomes to enjoin others to reflect on and acknowledge their participation in the structural processes, and to listen to their account of how they work and our role in them. We share responsibility to fashion organized means of changing how the processes work so they will issue in less injustice. Our working through state institutions is often an effective means of such collective action to change structural processes, but states are not the only tools of effective collective action.<sup>20</sup> The form of responsibility, then, is political in these senses that acting on my responsibilities involves joining with others in a public discourse where we try to persuade one another about courses of collective action that will contribute to ameliorating the problem.

<sup>18</sup>Robert Goodin, "Responsibilities," *Utilitarianism as a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 81–7.

<sup>19</sup>May, *Sharing Responsibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), ch. 2.

<sup>20</sup>Melanie Beth Oliviero and Adele Simmons recommend uses of civil society organizations for addressing issues of labor standards; see "Who's minding the store? Global civil society and corporate responsibility," *Global Civil Society 2002*, ed. Marlies Glasius, Mary Kaldo and Helmut Anheier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 77–107. Archon Fung develops a model for a process of improving labor conditions that combines state institutions and decentralized deliberative civic organizations, including those involving affected workers; Fung, "Deliberative democracy and international labor standards," *Governance*, 16 (2003), 51–71.



An important corollary of this feature of political responsibility is that many of those properly thought to be victims of harm or injustice may nevertheless have political responsibility in relation to it. In a fault model of responsibility, blaming those who claim to be victims of injustice functions to absolve others of responsibility for their plight. In a conception of political responsibility, however, those who can properly be argued as victims of structural injustice can be called to a responsibility they share with others in the structures to engage in actions directed at transforming the structures. In the case of labor exploitation, the workers themselves ought to resist if they can by means of their own collective organization. Without the support of others taking responsibility for working conditions in ways that support them, however, they are less likely to succeed.

Conceptualizing political responsibility as distinct from blame is important not only philosophically, but also for the sake of motivating political action. Frequently the reaction of people being blamed for a wrong is defensive—to look for other agents who should be blamed instead of them, or to find excuses that mitigate their liability in those cases where they must agree that their actions do causally contribute to the harm. Such practices of accusation and defense have an important place in morality and law. In many contexts where the issue is how to mobilize collective action for the sake of social change and greater justice, however, such rhetorics of blame and finger-pointing displacement lead more to resentment and refusal to take responsibility than to useful basis of action. If corporate executives or shoe buyers hear the claims of anti-sweatshop activists as laying blame on them personally for the conditions under which the shoes are produced, they rightly become indignant, or scoff at the absurd extremism of the movement. A concept of political responsibility separate from and additional to responsibility as liability allows us to call on one another to take responsibility *together* for the fact that our actions collectively assume and contribute to the complex structural processes that enable the working conditions we deplore and make them difficult for any single agent to change.<sup>21</sup> As I discuss in the next section, this does not necessarily imply that all who share responsibility have an *equal* responsibility. The power to influence the processes that produce unjust outcomes is an important factor distinguishing degrees of responsibility.

Earlier I suggested that some of Thomas Pogge's formulation of the responsibilities of global justice wrongly slip into a blame-oriented language.

<sup>21</sup>William Connolly makes a distinction similar to Arendt's between responsibility as blame and political responsibility. For him the resentment and count-accusation dialectic that accompanies blame in a discourse of public affairs makes political identity overly rigid and paralyzes action. Thus he recommends a notion of political responsibility without blame and with a more fluid and ambiguous understanding of the sources of wrong than the implicitly Christian identification of the sinner. See Connolly, *Identity/Difference* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), esp. ch. 4. Melissa Orlie also distinguishes between a sentiment of resentment exhibited in blaming and holding oneself and others politically responsible. See Orlie, *Living Ethically, Acting Politically* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 169–73.

Briefly examining how can help clarify why the distinction is important. In some of his discussions Pogge conceives the institutions and social processes in which most of the world's people are embedded as a system that is *imposed* by some on others. He finds a small global elite—affluent citizens and holders of political and economic power in resource-rich developed countries—who “enforce a global poverty regime under which we may claim the world's natural resources for ourselves and can distribute these among ourselves on mutually agreeable terms.”<sup>22</sup> He refers to “the design of a global economic order” which is determined by a tiny minority of participants, and finds that a global economic order is being imposed on people in developing countries by Western governments acting in the name of their citizens, which presses many people into grinding poverty and exposes them to domination.<sup>23</sup>

The language of design, enforcement and imposition in these formulations encourages a reversion to a liability model of responsibility for global economic relations. If “we” impose an unjust order on “them,” then we should be blamed for this wrong. Certainly some particular agents can and should be blamed for specific decisions they make and actions they take whose consequences in worsening the lives of poor people can be traced. Perhaps we should blame decision-makers at the International Monetary Fund, for example, for the consequences on poor people of the harsh conditions they impose on states in the service of structural adjustment. It is not helpful, however, to construct the entire network of economic interdependence that links North American consumers to East Asian workers as a design wrongly imposed on others for which some people can be blamed. Implicitly such a formulation absolves too many ordinary people, in the South as well as the North, of responsibilities they should take up, if only responsibilities to organize pressure on powerful global actors.

So how does the model of political responsibility apply to the claims of the anti-sweatshop movement? I said earlier that local owners and managers, and to some extent the local state, should be held responsible in the sense of liable for the miserable pay and working conditions of factories where many consumer goods exported to the United States and Europe are produced. Political responsibility adds to rather than replaces this first layer of responsibility. Because corporate executives, university administrations, retailers, and consumers act within a set of structures that materially connect them to one another and to factory workers, they have responsibilities to concern themselves with the wellbeing of those workers. Acknowledging such political responsibility does not imply accepting blame for being a direct cause of the poor conditions. It does mean acknowledging that they contribute by their actions to perpetuating the structural conditions, incentives and constraints that condition the actions

<sup>22</sup>Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Cambridge Polity Press, 2002), p. 142.

<sup>23</sup>“Priorities of Global Justice,” p. 43.

of the owners and managers whose actions are the most immediate cause. None of these more distant agents can act alone to improve working conditions, however. Instead they must act collectively. Thus taking responsibility for distant sweatshop conditions involves recognizing a shared responsibility, persuading others that they share it as well, and organizing forms of collective action designed to change the incentive structures, alter the constraints, or shift the distribution of benefits in continuing to buy and sell goods manufactured by superexploited workers.

#### IV. REASONING ABOUT POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Some people might object to the conception of political responsibility I have outlined on the grounds that it seems to make nearly everyone responsible for nearly everything. Most of us participate in a number of structural processes that arguably have disadvantaging, harmful or unjust consequences for some people in virtue of our jobs, the market choices we make, or other activities. Surely it is asking too much, the objection runs, for each of us to worry about all these modes of participating in structures and how we might adjust our lives and relation to others so as to reduce their unjust effects. Our relation to many of these structural processes is so diffuse, and the possibility that our own action can effect a change in outcomes is often so remote, that it is more reasonable to limit our moral concern to matters where we stand in direct relation to others and can see clearly the effect of our action on them.

Before attempting to quell this fear that accepting a concept of political responsibility makes everyone equally responsible for all injustices, let me dwell for a moment on this anxiety. Part of the purpose for noticing structural injustice and theorizing responsibility in relation to it is precisely to question the common intuition that the moral claims of justice ought not to be too demanding on individuals. Many philosophers and citizens reject as unreasonable moral arguments whose conclusions would require decent law-abiding persons to give up very much time, energy, or resources in the effort to right wrongs.

Within a different paradigm of moral responsibility, however, which I will call existentialist, the claims of justice unavoidably create anxiety. Yes, there are more and greater needs, harms, and social problems than we feel our puny efforts can respond to. Just because we might find overwhelming the objective problems that call for responsibility and may feel ourselves inadequate to this call is not a reason to trim down moral claims to a more emotionally manageable size. I argued above that the structural injustices for which we share responsibility occur through ongoing and normally accepted institutional relations and actions. Taking political responsibility thus often entails bringing what is normal and acceptable into question, to the extent that it produces or reproduces injustice. As Liam Murphy argues, so long as the society in which we live is far from the ideal of justice, moral demands on individuals will be rather stringent and

perhaps difficult to meet. They do not amount to every individual taking on the personal burden of righting all wrongs, however, which is unreasonable, but persons jointly working to make better institutions.<sup>24</sup>

If the motive for the objection is not to reduce the idea of political responsibility to absurdity, but rather to ask how a person should reason about his or her own action in the face of structural injustice, then the question is reasonable. While I cannot answer the question adequately in the space remaining in this essay, I will indicate some parameters for reasoning about a particular agent's responsibility in relation to structural injustice.

Robert Goodin theorizes a conception of social responsibility which attends more to outcomes than to the causal production of harms. In answer to the question, how then do agents know what are their responsibilities, he proposes a notion of task responsibility. A person's position in an institution or the relationship in which he or she stands with others implies certain duties to see to it that specific ends come about; the performer of a task has some discretion about how these responsibilities will be discharged, as long as these ends are achieved. If other people do not discharge their responsibilities, moreover, he or she may have responsibilities to try to make up for their laxity from their own position, even though there may be no extra reward for doing so.<sup>25</sup>

This idea of task responsibility may be a good starting point for responding to the above stated fear that political responsibility makes everyone responsible for everything. A concept of task responsibility highlights the fact that many people share responsibility for producing acceptable outcomes. There is thus a division of labor in political responsibility; each of us must look to our own institutional positions, skills and capacities, and the other responsibilities that come to us, to assess our tasks that will most effectively coordinate with others to help bring about more just outcomes.

If task responsibility refers to the way existing institutions assign responsibilities to persons, however, this concept will often fall short as a guide to reasoning about action in relation to structural injustice. For one of the causes of structural injustices is the way at least some institutions assign tasks. A spokeswoman for a major retailer's job is to issue statements of concern about sweatshop working conditions which deflect responsibility onto faraway subcontractors. A lawyer's job in the same company is to prepare and review documents that ensure that the multiple contractual relationships the retailer has conform to law in every jurisdiction under which they fall. The sales clerk's job in an outlet store that sells the company's clothes is to flatter me when I try on the clothes. By hypothesis here, the problem is not that people are failing in the performance of their tasks; on the contrary, they are doing their jobs very well. The problem is the way that the institutions are defined, their power, purposes

<sup>24</sup>Liam B. Murphy, *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>25</sup>Robert Goodin, "Apportioning responsibilities," *Utilitarianism as a Public Philosophy*, pp. 100–18.

and interactions with one another, as well as how they define tasks to fulfill those purposes.

While the performance of certain institutionally defined tasks contributes to the perpetuation of injustice, at the same time there may be tasks that could be performed for which there is no place in existing institutions. It is no one's job to protect workers who try to organize a union in their hidden production facility, no official well-resourced government or international agency has assigned members of its staff the task of reducing the perceived need for export processing zones or changing incentives for small factory owners in the developing world. Political responsibility in respect to structural injustice, in other words, often requires transforming institutions and the tasks they assign. This is everyone's task and no one's in particular.

Thus we may have arrived again at the question, given that there are many institutional situations that should be transformed in order to further social justice, how should individuals think about their own responsibilities? One parameter of thinking here refers to the degree of injustice. Where basic rights are violated in a widespread fashion over a long term, world citizens have greater responsibility to take action directed at redress than for lesser injustices. The anti-sweatshop movement has succeeded in promoting widespread public discussion of labor conditions precisely because the working conditions it exposes are both egregious, widespread, and predictable.

Approaching such structural injustice, we can appeal not to pre-assigned tasks that people have, but rather to their institutional or social *position*. What might be required from one's position is doing something different from or additional to the tasks normally assigned to that position, but different persons nevertheless stand in differing positions in structures that produce unjust outcomes, which afford them different opportunities and capacities for influencing those outcomes. I suggest that persons can reason about their action in relation to structural injustice along parameters of *connection, power, and privilege*.

*Connection* – Earlier I argued that moral agents have responsibilities in relation to any and all of those whose participation in institutions one assumes by one's own actions. This conclusion generates the problem now under discussion, because most of us are connected to too many people mediated by too many institutions to be able to take active responsibility in respect to all of them. One way to prioritize among these is to give specificity to some connections that are easier to discern as implicating institutions in which one is directly involved. Tracing particular connection between my own action locales – my workplace, my city, my church – and distant strangers potentially affected by or related to the activities of these institutions helps to de-reify the anonymous structural processes that mediate between us. The anti-sweatshop movement has had some success in reducing the anonymity of market processes by demanding that universities and other bulk consumers, as well as large retailers, identify the

sites where particular items sold in particular places to which they are connected are manufactured. Giving such pragmatic priority to connections that I can discern between my institutional participation and faraway others carries the danger, however, that severe injustice will be ignored because people have not seen, or have chosen not to see, this sort of connection between themselves and this injustice.

Recognizing the importance of connection in locating responsibility, some people decide that the way to exercise this responsibility is by trying to disconnect. They choose not to buy certain products or brands, for example, because they have reason to think that they are manufactured under unjust conditions. Where such boycott is individual it has no effect on those conditions, however. It is nearly impossible in the contemporary world for a person to remove herself from implication through her actions in structures that produce injustice. To the extent that this implication is a ground of political responsibility, then, the responsibility cannot be removed by attempts at withdrawal; it can only be taken up. Organized boycotts involving masses of people can be one effective means of exercising political responsibility.

*Power* – A person's position in structural processes usually carries different degrees of potential or actual power or influence over the processes that produce the outcomes. Organizations and institutions, moreover, vary in their power and ability to influence structural processes. Some of the large major clothing retailers, for example, such as Benetton, Gap, or Guess?, have built transnational systems not only of retail outlets, but directly contract with small manufacturers. Because of the size, reach and relative influence of such organizations, it makes sense to expect major decision-makers in them to take responsibility for working conditions.<sup>26</sup> The anti-sweatshop movement recognizes this criterion of power or influence often by targeting its actions on corporate or regulatory bodies arguably with power to change structural processes. The power and influence parameter for reasoning suggests that where individuals and organizations do not have sufficient energy and resources to respond to all structural injustices to which they are connected, they should focus on those where they have more capacity to influence structural processes. More powerful individuals and institutions, of course, often have more interest in perpetuation of the status quo than change in the processes and their outcomes. For this reason individuals and organizations with relatively less power but some ability to influence the powerful individuals and institutions can take responsibility actively to pressure the more powerful to take responsibility for change.

<sup>26</sup>Major retail firms have increasingly gained control over a vertically integrated global apparel industry. See Bonacich and Appelbaum, *Behind the Label*, ch. 3; Rosen, *Making Sweatshops*, chs 10 and 11. Some lawyers argue for a legal strategy that would extend liability for violations of labor standards to the manufacturer who contracts out work, and not only to the contractor. See Leo L. Lam, "Designer duty: extending liability to manufacturers for violations of labor standards in garment industry sweatshops," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, 141 (1992), 623–67. Such a strategy must be pursued within a single legal system, of course, and cannot cross jurisdictions between, say, Thailand and the United States.

*Privilege* – Where there are structural injustices, these usually produce not only victims of injustice, but persons who acquire relative privileges by virtue of the structures. Most who occupy positions of power within mediated institutions or processes that harm some people or make them vulnerable to harm also derive privileges from this power. In most situations of structural injustice, there are relatively privileged persons who have relatively little power as individuals in their institutional positions. North American college students or European office workers who buy shirts or shoes made under sweatshop conditions have little power by virtue of their position. They are privileged, however, both in relation to sweatshop workers and to many other people in the world. Persons who benefit relatively from structural inequalities have special moral responsibilities to contribute to organized efforts to correct them, not because they are to blame for them, but because they have more resources and are able to adapt to changed circumstances without suffering serious deprivation.

From this point that privilege generates special responsibilities, however, it does not follow that victims of injustice do not share responsibility for contributing to the alteration of the circumstances that constrain their options. On the contrary. I pointed out earlier that one difference between a liability model of responsibility and the concept of political responsibility consists precisely in that those who suffer injustice share responsibility for helping to bring about change. Thus in the example of sweatshops, the specific position of the workers carries unique responsibilities. Their conditions are likely to improve only if they organize to demand and monitor such improvement. Victims of injustice, however, usually can only succeed in their own efforts to change the structural conditions of injustice if others in a position to support them take responsibility to do so.

Political responsibility, I have argued above, is necessarily a shared responsibility both because the injustices that call for redress are the product of the mediated actions of many, and thus because they can only be rectified through collective action. For most such injustices, the goal is to change structural processes by reforming institutions or creating new ones that will better regulate the process to prevent harmful outcomes. Thus a final consideration in reasoning about where a person might put her practical energies in taking political responsibility involves coordination with others to achieve such change. Just as a person can make almost no difference by trying to disconnect from the processes, so an individual can rarely decide to act alone or with just a few other people to change it. Thus sometimes the fact that there is a promising movement to join can be a reason to give priority to some issues over others. Movements always need beginnings, of course; so in the absence of coordinated action involving significant numbers of people, but where other considerations ought to make a particular issue of high priority, a few individuals can try to persuade others of its importance and enjoin them to become organized.

Like some other forms of responsibility, political responsibility is open about what actions count as discharging it. While in this paper I have endorsed the

claims of the anti-sweatshop movement that apparel manufacturers, institutional purchasers of apparel, and individual consumers have responsibilities toward faraway workers who produce these goods, I have said nothing about what ought to be done to improve those conditions structurally. The anti-sweatshop movement has had some significant successes in its short life, not only in raising consciousness and motivating some people and institutions to assume responsibility, but also in increasing transparency of the connections among factories and firms in the industry and in supporting unions of affected workers. Nevertheless, there are significant disagreements both within and outside the movement about whether some tactics do more harm than good and thus about what are the best ways in the long run to encourage and enforce decent working conditions.<sup>27</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this essay has been to begin an answer to the question: how should agents think about responsibility in relation to structural social injustice? I have proposed a concept of political responsibility which is distinct from a liability model of responsibility in five respects. (1) Unlike responsibility as liability, political responsibility does not isolate some responsibility parties in order to absolve others. (2) Whereas blame or liability seeks remedy for a deviation from an acceptable norm, usually by an event that has reached a terminus, with political responsibility we are concerned with structural causes of injustice that are normal and ongoing. (3) Political responsibility is more forward-looking than backward-looking. (4) What it means to take up or assign political responsibility is more open and discretionary than what it means to hold an agent blameworthy or liable. (5) An agent shares political responsibility with others whose actions contribute to the structural processes that produce injustice.

I have elaborated this concept of political responsibility through the example of the apparel industry and the social movement seeking changes in working conditions in it for at least two reasons. This example exhibits structural injustice where some of the social positions in the structure are fairly easy to identify. Because in this case the structures cross nations and boundaries, moreover, it well illustrates that the scope of issues of justice corresponding to political responsibility derives not from the boundaries of a state or political jurisdiction, but from the connections generated by the structural processes. Where this scope is beyond existing regulatory and political institutions, there may be need to construct some to correspond to that scope. While in this essay I have focused on political responsibility for labor conditions in a global industry, my claim is that the concept is generalizable and applies to any structural social injustice.

<sup>27</sup>For one set of debates, see Archon Fung, Dara O'Rourke, and Charles Sabel, eds, *Can We Put an End to Sweatshops?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).