

Forms of systemic power

This fourth arena of power is dominated by interlinked systems of patriarchy, capitalism, structural racism, and colonialism–imperialism. Historically, these systems have cemented a logic of domination, exploitation, and superiority that permeate our institutional structures and ways of thinking. These systemic ‘genetic codes’¹ work to:

- ⋮ Define who and what matters.
- ⋮ Rationalise the commodification of labour and nature.
- ⋮ Dehumanise and subordinate those deemed to have less value – often in relationship to their gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, etc.
- ⋮ Normalise violence and the threat of violence as ways to enforce order.

These oppressive systems of power are consistently contested by other systemic models and ideas.

Capitalism: the commodification and extraction of resources for profit and accumulation

- ⋮ Includes the exploitation of labour, natural resources, genetic material, public goods, and personal data.
- ⋮ Assigns value to different kinds of labour and ‘work’, with reproductive and care work assigned zero or little value.
- ⋮ Morphs and evolves over the centuries to include new arrangements, rules and modes of exploitation, and logics to justify them.

Patriarchy: the hierarchy that ‘naturalises’ the dominance and superiority of men and masculinity as leaders, decisionmakers, providers, and fighters, and women and femininity as weaker, less capable, less intelligent, and primarily useful for reproduction:

- ⋮ Is based on a rigid biological binary between male and female.
- ⋮ Defines ‘the family’ as heterosexual only.
- ⋮ Rejects gender non-confirming and trans people as threatening and abnormal.
- ⋮ Judges LGBTQI+ people as inferior or dangerous.
- ⋮ Establishes biological hierarchies such as ableism and ageism.

¹ Grassroots Global Justice use this phrase to describe systemic logic in their International Feminist Organizing Schools, 2021, www.ggjalliance.org

Structural racism/white supremacy: the hierarchy that attributes less value, humanity, and rational capacity to people based on their caste, ethnicity, skin colour, culture, and nationality:

- Is structural, institutionalised, and reproduced through both unconscious and actively promoted beliefs and narratives in media and popular culture.
- Is maintained through violence, the threat of violence, and systematic exclusion from resources, opportunities, and decision-making.

Colonialism–Imperialism: a geographic, racialised code of inequality:

- ‘Justifies’ and institutionalises the exploitation and extraction of people and resources from some countries or peoples.
- Is based on race and ethnicity, painting some societies and cultures as ‘primitive’, exotic, or less ‘civilised’.
- Creates paternalistic relationships, reinforced by religion and other beliefs.

Examples of the ‘logics’ that justify and sustain systemic power abound.

- Attacks on women’s reproductive rights and access to abortion are framed as the defence of motherhood and family.
- Loan forgiveness for corporations is presented as essential for a healthy economy, while poor and working people and the Global South are forced into ‘austerity.’
- Extractive industries are framed as ‘development’ even as they destroy local land, water, forests and ways of life, and drive climate change.

A new political energy is driving efforts to reject these logics and the devastation they cause. To respond to systemic power, we must cultivate radical imagination, unifying ideologies, and alternative social, economic, and political models – feminism, the commons, regenerative economics, abolition, and liberation – to re-define our future.