HANDOUT:

Invisible and systemic power in narratives

Operating across three, related dimensions, invisible power is...

Socialised. Values, norms, and beliefs are reproduced through everyday socialisation, often unconsciously, by all actors (for example, those of patriarchy). Here, invisible power is the collective internalisation and embodiment of values about ourselves and others and what is good, right, or normal.

Institutionalised.These same values, norms, and beliefs are reflected and embedded in the logics and hierarchies of many social structures and institutions – from families and education to laws and economics. Building on and reinforcing socialisation, here invisible power is the pervasive reproduction of deep structures in society.

Mobilised. Dominant narratives are used consciously and intentionally to shape and manipulate beliefs, reinforce social hierarchies and inequalities, and uphold the power, legitimacy, and privilege of some groups over others. They seek to explain what's wrong and what needs to be solved and who and what's to blame. Here, invisible power is wilfully exercised at the service of political interests and often accompanied by a legal and policy agenda. Although narratives operate in this dimension, they are grounded in the other two.

In all three dimensions, these norms and beliefs are underpinned and reinforced by systemic power – the logic and codes that define all relationships, such as patriarchy, structural racism, extractive capitalism, and colonialism/imperialism. Like invisible power, systemic power is a contested arena in which alternative logics and codes – expressed in contrasting narratives – compete with the dominant ones. For example, identity can be both a cause of oppression and a source of connection, community, and liberation. Because invisible and systemic power are socialised, institutionalised, and mobilised, many strategic entry points exist for activists and movements:

Affirming positive norms and beliefs.
Reforming and rebuilding institutions.
Creating and mobilising transformational narratives.