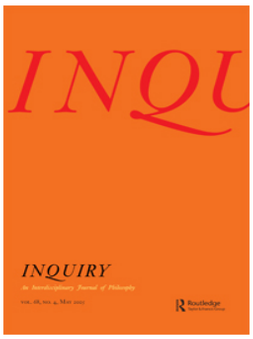

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Structural unemployment and structural injustice

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ABSTRACT

Structural unemployment refers to labour displacement attributable to neither economic cycles nor gaps between employment periods. Caused largely by technological changes, offshoring, changes to the industrial composition and labour structure, and the financialisation of economies, structural unemployment leaves many of its affected individuals materially, psychosocially, and relationally deprived. Structural unemployment should neither be conceived of as normatively acceptable in virtue of its being 'natural', nor be viewed as primarily a phenomenon for which agents can be held morally blameworthy and responsible for redress. Instead, the detrimental effects of structural unemployment are best conceptualised as an instance of structural injustice, with no individual agent is morally responsible for the outcomes, yet all agents involved in reproducing their background conditions would thus bear forward-looking responsibilities to redress such unjust effects. Existing policy discussions of solutions to structural unemployment tend to place significant emphasis upon governmental responses. Responding to the structural injustice of structural unemployment would require actors beyond the state to leverage the resources afforded to them by their social roles, to both remedy the existing effects of and prevent future occurrences of structural unemployment, in ways that are sensitive to the extent by which their actions reproduce the explanatory causes of injustices.

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KEYWORDS Structural unemployment; structural injustice; role-based ethics; work ethics; Iris Marion Young

1. Introduction

> But by the '80s, the factories started closing, jobs were shipped overseas, and thousands of working-class Rhode Islanders suddenly found themselves out-of-work. My dad was one of those Rhode Islanders […] he was forced into early retirement in his 50's, and our family had to cut back. (Raimondo 2021)

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In her public speeches and appearances, former US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo would frequently cite her father as an example of an American worker out of a job as a result of the decade-long process of offshoring of manufacturing operations by large American companies. Many studies contend that a significant number of American jobs have been lost over the past seventy years due to the country's widening deficit with a raft of trading partners – including China, Japan, Mexico, the European Union, and others.[1,2] During the rapid and intense decades of trade liberalisation that followed the end of the Cold War, the removal of trade barriers led to the rerouting of supply chains, exporting of domestic employment opportunities in advanced industrial economies, and shifting employment and labour market patterns. The fates that befell these displaced workers were mixed. Some found alternative employment opportunities. Others exited the workforce early, as was the case with Raimondo's father. Many stood to gain from the cheaper goods manufactured abroad then imported into the US. Yet still, some found themselves excluded semi-permanently from the workforce – they were unable to find new jobs, incapable of learning and acquiring new employable skills, and struggled at large to adapt to the rapidly shifting labour market (Autor, Dorn, and Hanson 2016).

Offshoring is but one amongst numerous causes of what is termed by economists as *structural unemployment*. 'Unemployed persons' refer to those who, above the minimal working age, are in neither paid employment or self-employment, yet are available for work and actively seeking work (Winkelmann 2014; OECD 2023). Unemployment can be caused by 'changes in economic activity over the business cycle', where during an economic contraction, shrinking demand reduces the expected revenue and firms downsize to lower costs (Reserve Bank of Australia 2024) – such instances are termed *cyclical unemployment*. Unemployment could also be *frictional*, when 'those unemployed […] are transitioning between jobs. Such unemployment is caused largely by an information asymmetry [… and temporary] mismatch between labour supply and demand' (International Labour Office 2012).

[1]There is extensive debate over the exact figures involved. Scott et al. (2022) make the claim that 'from 1998 to 2021, the U.S. lost more than 5 million manufacturing jobs thanks to the growing trade deficit in manufactured goods with [trading partners].' The Reshoring Initiative (2017) put their estimates of 'the number of manufacturing jobs lost, measured at the current level of U.S. productivity, [to be] 3.35 million'. On the other hand, Hicks and Devaraj (2015) argue that changes in production per worker (via automation) played a more significant role in shaping the total number of employed individuals and posit that the effects of offshoring have been unduly exaggerated.

[2]Such attribution need not carry with it a judgment of unfairness or wrongdoing on the part of other actors, though is often politicised accordingly.

Unemployment that is neither cyclical nor frictional, then, amounts to *structural unemployment* (henceforth SU). SU usually occurs when there is a systemic, long-standing mismatch between the demands of available jobs and the offering by those seeking employment. It arises from fundamental changes to the economy – including the offshoring and relocating of supply chains or the introduction of new technologies. In the 1930s, economist John Maynard Keynes advanced the thesis of 'technological unemployment', defined as 'unemployment due to our discovery of means of economising the use of labour outrunning the pace at which we can find new uses for labour' (Keynes 1932). With the advent of digitalisation and artificial intelligence (AI) in the twenty-first century – particularly with large language models and generative AI – there is a growing chorus of voices speculating that AI, too, could induce significant structural, technological unemployment amongst present generations of workers, especially those who strain to acclimatise to the evolved needs of prospective employers (Autor 2015; Schmidpeter and Winter-Ebmer 2021).

There remains a distinct dearth of writings in non-Marxist political and moral philosophy over the normative significance of *SU* – as noted and addressed by Reiff (2015) in his instrumental work on the matter. Most scholars' attention within the field of labour economics is devoted to interrogating the extent to which processes such as automation and offshoring *create more jobs* than they *replace or eliminate* (Hicks and Devaraj 2015; Acemoglu and Restrepo 2018), the sociopolitical consequences of widespread unemployment on social cohesion (Berman et al. 2011; Paasonen 2019), or, indeed, the exact policies that ought to be adopted to address the widespread unemployment potentially brought about by accelerated automation (Van Parijs and Vanderborght 2017; Parr 2022).

The lingering questions are – is SU an issue we ought to feel strongly about through a normative lens? If so, who should bear the responsibilities of tackling or responding to SU? Beyond the obvious consequentialist response, most existing accounts either deny that there is anything troubling about SU – on the grounds that it reflects a *non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment* (henceforth 'natural unemployment rate') in any given economy (Friedman 1968) that cannot be altered through aggregate demand-centric stimulus alone. A few standalone accounts examine the effects of unemployment on individuals' mental states, physical wellbeing, and ability to make meaningful sense of their own lives yet stop short of drawing further conclusions accordingly

(Pohlan 2019; Mejia 2023; Belic 2024). In failing to establish the relevant duties or responsibilities on the part of other parties in ameliorating or resolving the apparent plight of the workers, however, these accounts are incomplete. Reiff (2015) views the role of the state as highly pertinent in upholding *distributive justice* vis-à-vis the unemployed – by granting them both minimal protections and guarantees of living standards and equipping them with the skills to find new jobs, though the role of non-state entities (e.g. private citizens, businesses, civil society actors, and beyond) remains under-explored even in his account.

I shall restrict the scope of the following article to predominantly advanced industrial economies (e.g. the US, Europe, the UK, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and Korea etc.), on the grounds that developing or emerging economies may experience SU due to a raft of factors pertaining to extractive and exploitative political institutions, which unduly complicate our discussion. Drawing upon Young's (2004, 2011) influential account, I set forth the view that under certain conditions, SU should be conceptualised as a form of structural injustice. Whilst distributive justice-oriented interpretations of unemployment tend to emphasise the detrimental impacts of unemployment on individuals' lost ability to access and utilise resources – e.g. income/wealth, housing and assets – and the ensuing impacts on their wellbeing, structural injustice-centric accounts focus on the relations of *domination* and *deprivation* undergirding the experiences of many who are structurally unemployed.

Under most circumstances, no individual agent is to blame *per se* for such SU. Yet such injustices in turn give rise to forward-looking political responsibilities on the part of all who are involved in *reproducing* the processes of SU through their actions (McKeown 2018).[3] To discharge these responsibilities calls for an understanding of the social roles that we each occupy, and through which we contribute to both reifying and potentially addressing the structural injustices of SU. Zheng's (2018) Role-Ideal Model can be adapted and strengthened through heightened sensitivity to ways in which structural injustices are reproduced over time – and applied accordingly to the context of unemployment.

Section 2 concisely delves into the empirical causes and effects, both positive and negative, of SU This section also outlines the exact scope of individuals who are affected by SU that we will take to be of interest

[3]Evidently, these responsibilities can be outweighed by competing considerations, pertaining to sufficientarian (Gosseries 2012) or prioritarian (Parfit 1997) accounts of distributive justice in relation to other groups of individuals. I do not make the claim that our responsibilities towards those affected by SU are overriding and determinative.

to our enquiry, explaining the *sui generis* nature of the large-scale, involuntary episodes on which I focus. Section 3 examines and critiques three existing positions on SU, which comprise, respectively, that (i) SU is not a problem given it is a part of natural unemployment, (ii) SU should be blamed on select actors (e.g. firms, consumers, and actors who drive forward innovation and offshoring), and (iii) that SU is best approached as a primarily distributive injustice, to be addressed by the state.

Section 4 makes the case for interpreting SU as an instance of structural injustice, and why there exist corresponding responsibilities on the part of all who reproduce the background conditions of SU to address the injustice at hand. Section 5 offers a key theoretical solution to the question of praxis, namely the *Reproduction-centric Role-Ideal Model* (RRIM), in specifying ways in which actors beyond the state should and can step up to tackle SU and its consequent challenges. Section 6 concludes.

2. Understanding structural unemployment

As identified by Janoski, Luke, and Oliver (2014), there exist primarily four key factors contributing towards SU across advanced industrial economies – namely, skills mismatch induced by a structural shift from manufacturing to service jobs, offshoring to countries with lower manufacturing costs, the rise of automation and advanced technologies, and the increasingly financialised nature of the global economy. These four forces have contributed to the structural displacement of labour throughout the past 100 years.[4]

There are two further clarifications concerning the particular subset of SU on which we are focusing. First, we will primarily focus on instances of involuntary SU, as opposed to voluntary SU: that is, individuals who opt to quit their jobs as they find the nature or offer of the work unsatisfactory, seek to apply for newer jobs, yet fail to succeed in so doing due to the structural fundamentals of the economy, are not the primary subjects of our discussion. Similarly, individuals who voluntarily, out of their own autonomous volitions, decide not to relocate, retrain, or undertake the necessary training to seek new jobs, would also count as cases of voluntary SU. They are not the primary subsets of interest to our thesis – for it is fair to say they are not adversely impacted by the structural injustice of

[4]For more literature on automation and its displacing effects on employment, see Frey and Osborne (2017), Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2014), Briggs and Kodnani (2023) (on artificial intelligence, in particular).

SU. The SU we focus on is both involuntary and large-scale, as opposed to the result of individual, voluntary choices.

Second, we should exclude seasonal variants of SU – that is, individuals who are only employed during particular seasons (e.g. ski resort operation during winter, polo coaching during spring/summer). An individual may be seasonally unemployed qua one occupation yet take up additional work during 'off-seasons'; Employment in other forms (e.g. working in the hotel and food/beverage industries) remains feasible and available in these cases to the individuals in question.

For this paper, we are primarily concerned with *non-seasonal, large-scale, involuntary* SU.

Victims

Not all workers who find themselves displaced by SU are necessarily worse-off due to it – there are some who would opt subsequently to leave the workforce and retire early; others may pursue options such as relocating elsewhere or depending upon economically viable family members. Yet a significant proportion of these unemployed individuals may nevertheless experience at least one out of the following three dimensions of deprivation:

The first concerns *material deprivation*. Ample evidence suggests that those who are unemployed for protracted periods of time may experience acute economic hardships posed by the loss of a stable income stream and downward socio-economic mobility (Noble 1995; Parr 2022; Spencer 2023). In their study of material hardships subsequent to the Great Recession, Ahn and Song (2017) find that older workers are faced with severe financial repercussions upon losing their jobs, for they are less likely than younger counterparts to be reemployed, struggle to access public and administrative support, and are thus left with 'increased risks of experiencing a bill-paying, health, or food hardships' in the US.

The second concerns *psychosocial deprivation*. Significant stress and psychological strain caused by unemployment to the affected workers and their family, given the anxiety associated with job-seeking in a highly precarious and volatile job market (Paul and Moser 2009; Wanberg 2012; Koen, Klehe, and Van Vianen 2013). Indeed, Pohlan (2019) finds that unemployed workers are likely to develop negative subjective perception of social integration, experience lower life satisfaction, and struggle to meet psychosocial needs typically associated with

employment – such as social status and a robust sense of self-efficacy. Indeed, some posit that specifically automation-induced technological unemployment, given the rapid pace with which it occurs and the unpredictability of technological evolution, could deprive workers of the capacity to make and develop stable, long-term plans over their lives and career choices (Belic 2024).

The third concerns *relational deprivation*, which tracks what Anderson terms to be individuals on the lower ends of inequalities in 'standing, power, and esteem' (Anderson and Gutting 2015). Inequalities of standing arise when the interests of members of some groups are weighed over others. Inequalities of power are developed when some individuals exercise arbitrary, unaccountable power over their subordinates. Inequalities of esteem manifest in the intentional exclusion, humiliation, and demeaning by some groups of others. The net result of these inequalities is a society where groups are related to one another as non-equals, with clear disparities in status and corresponding attitudes or norms of treatment following from such differences. All three senses of inequality are present when it comes to unemployment (Hirseland and Ramos Lobato 2014; Brand 2015).

These three forms of deprivation induce significant welfare loss on the part of individuals, yielding a deep sense of stunted agency and access to opportunities. Such vulnerabilities are also likely to be differentially distributed and experienced amongst workers from different cultural, ethnic, educational, and social backgrounds. The deep entrenchment of disadvantages confronting gender and visible minorities means that 'technology-induced labor market vulnerabilities are concentrated on some social groups and can cause economic and political disruption' (Bürgisser 2023, 2; also see Dottori 2021).

Beneficiaries

What is often overlooked in literature on unemployment is the extent to which there exist clear and demonstrable beneficiaries of SU who stand to gain from the processes that precipitating such widespread unemployment. Following the taxonomy as outlined by Janoski, Luke, and Oliver (2014), it is clear that each of the four chief causes of SU has come to enrich select groups of stakeholders.

For instance, the offshoring of manufacturing has been pivotal in ensuring the continued supply of cheap goods for individual consumption, which is especially vital in countries with sizeable middle-class

households with a higher propensity to consume (Siripurapu and Berman 2023). Jaravel and Sager (2019a) find that the rise in trade with China bolstered the average purchasing power per annum of US families by $1,500 per household between 2000 and 2007. The rise of lower-priced Chinese imports further lowered the prices of domestically made goods in the US. Jaravel and Sager (2019b) go onto arguing that 'trade with China increased the total purchasing power of US consumers by $411,464 for each displaced job (while average annual pay for jobs in these industries is about $40,000) [… implying that] the overall gains to US consumers through lower prices are large enough to compensate all [displaced] US workers'. The issue with this hypothesis, of course, is that those who lose their jobs due to trade are unlikely to be those who stand to gain the most, if at all, from offshoring.

The same could also be said of automation, which has indirectly precipitated the shift from manufacturing to service industries over the past few decades in advanced industrial economies. Autor (2015) notes, 'strong complementarities between automation and labor' can 'increase productivity, raise earnings, and augment demand for labor'; though hitherto wage gains have gone 'disproportionately to those at the top and at the bottom of the income and skill distribution, not to those in the middle' (5 and 10). Automation has enabled firms to cut costs and invest in alternative, revenue-generating technologies, measures, and strategies. Indeed, parts of the financial dividends of automation go into the furthering of technological capacities, such that the 'productivity effects of automation outweigh its potential displacement' (Aghion et al. 2020).

SU is an empirically likely implication of causal processes including offshoring, automation, as well as financialisation and improvements in managerial methods and efficiency, which have in turn spurred significant benefits for select groups of individuals. The upshot is not therefore that all SU is thereby justified – all things considered. Nor is it the case that the detrimental impacts of SU are always outweighed by the benefits that accompany its rise. Instead, we should thus recognise the complex nature of SU, which leaves in its wake both winners and losers. At times, these two subsets overlap; they often do not.

3. Evaluating three existing normative views on SU

We should now consider the question: who should, and for what reasons, bear responsibilities to redress the deprivation experienced by most of

the workers impacted by SU? My tentative view is as follows: for instances of involuntary, large-scale, non-seasonal SU, (a) we should find such episodes concerning and grounds for normatively binding imperatives on the part of parties other than the workers, though nevertheless (b) there need not be any particular blameworthy actor for the arising of SU. I begin with considering and rejecting two views conflicting with this tentative position.

The 'Natural' view

The first view challenges (a). It asserts that there is nothing normatively undesirable about SU. Whilst it is regrettable that some workers experience detrimental impacts, their plight does not amount to an issue of moral concern. The starting premise is that all economies are bound to possess a level of unemployment – even when it is at full employment: that is, where there is no cyclical or deficient-demand unemployment. Expansionary fiscal and monetary policymaking cannot reduce unemployment further without leading to an inflationary spiral, per criticisms of the Phillips Curve hypothesis (Volcker 1981). If there are individuals who experience extreme financial duress, economic destitution or poverty as a result of unemployment, then the case to care and provide for them can still be made yet on the basis of compassion or pro-poverty alleviation negative consequentialism. Yet unemployment, *per se,* is not a net moral bad or wrong, or so it seems.

Problematically, this view ignores the fact that the natural unemployment rate can and does change in response to decisions by powerful individual or collective actors – what is natural is in fact underdetermined. Once we permit experimentation with different political and institutional constellations giving rise to varied levels of labour market flexibility, we would realise that the natural rate can in fact be altered. Distinct policy and regulatory decisions can have causal impacts on the exact value of natural unemployment over time. Admittedly, such variations may be subtle: Barnichon and Matthes (2017) note that the natural unemployment rate in the US – whilst only observable indirectly – has experienced managed (though evident) fluctuations over the past 100 years, hovering between 4.5% and 5.5%. Yet more recent records, they find, 'have been running slightly below [… the] natural rate estimate', indicating that variations are indeed possible.

How may the rate be influenced? Measures aimed at stimulating aggregate demand are, of course, inefficacious in shifting the natural

unemployment rate. Yet public and private actors alike may opt to prioritise production decisions in particular industries or sectors, invest more or less into particular subjects and fields in the education system, and steer their economies towards lower levels of natural unemployment through supply-oriented policies. As noted by Frey and Osborne (2017), there is something distinctly *political* about the purportedly *natural* level of unemployment in an economy, and it behooves observers to not neglect the role of political actors in fostering the background conditions – as we shall see shortly. It is, after all, the combined decisions of governments, private enterprises, and individual actors over macroeconomic priorities and the elite bargaining of countries, when it comes to the specialisation and quality of the education system, the imposition or lack thereof of protectionist tariffs, and other crucial governmental decisions that can have an outsized role in determining the exact natural unemployment rate (Reiff 2015; Dercon 2022).

A challenge is as follows: suppose we are to grant that a particular natural unemployment rate (e.g. 3%) is the local optimum for the economy – such that any further adjustment would be *pareto-inefficient*. Drawing upon Parr (2022)'s defence of *competition harm* – adverse effects on individuals that are morally permissible if and only if there is good reason to preserve the competition in question (Clayton and Stemplowska 2016) – in the context of technological unemployment, we may be tempted to argue that the natural unemployment rate, too, is a competition harm. That certain workers are displaced due to firms' decisions to invest into and adopt innovation, is a price that societies must pay for enjoying the rewards of a capitalist economy free from overt state intervention. Fundamentally, the merits of having a competitive economy at a natural unemployment rate outweigh the harms caused. All firms in the economy are thus playing by a system of rules widely accepted and maintained, thereby aligning the incentives of disparate stakeholders to advance healthy economic growth at 'full employment'.

Even then, Parr's argument does not thereby vindicate the above assertion that natural unemployment is normatively non-problematic. I concur partially with Parr over his judgment that innovating firms who contribute towards automation-induced SU are merely 'playing [their] role within a justifiable system of rules'. Indeed, they are not to be blamed or deemed morally responsible for contributing towards or making use of such rules. Yet what Parr perhaps omits in the context of automation and innovation, is that whilst these rules on their own do not contravene any moral duty or law, *collectively* they can produce *structural injustice,* as

we shall see shortly. Those who stand to benefit from such rule-based competition may be wholly distinct from those who stand to lose – especially those who are the least advantaged under such inequalities. We should hence reject the *Natural View*.

The blame view

The second view challenges (b): it contends that certain individual agents are to *blame* for the workers' plight as a result of SU. Some would suggest that workers 'for [whom] life on unemployment income is preferable to life in the secondary sector' should bear moral responsibility for their own unemployment. After all, 'if people are unemployed, it is generally because they have decided against these jobs. They are however willing to work in a range of 'good' primary sector jobs, but they cannot get them. In this sense unemployment is both voluntary and involuntary' (Layard, Nickell, and Jackman 1991, 11 and 42). More generally, one may think that workers should develop the requisite skills to be deemed employable per contemporary standards. Workers who fail to do so, must assume the primary moral responsibility for their own failure to adjust to the given fact of unemployment.

From the onset, I have emphasised that we are focussing on episodes of involuntary unemployment. What Nelkin (2013) terms the *Control Principle*, as applied to the context of blameworthiness, states that 'people are responsible [and blameworthy] only for things within their control' (Sand 2020, 765). Many workers do not have meaningful control over the pace and domain of automation, as well as the changes under automation to the employment market and job opportunities available in the sectors in which they participate. Indeed, they may not even possess control over or access to means of affordable migration or new skill acquisition, given the costs and challenges involved in so doing (Autor, Dorn, and Hanson 2016). Not choosing to re-skill due to the huge costs involved, is not a reason for us to hold workers morally responsible. The claim that workers are to blame for the harms they suffer under structural unemployment ignores the background conditions that preclude individuals from being competitive within the setting at hand – employees may find themselves replaced with cheaper, faster, and more productive AI agents, despite having had no time or guidance in adjusting to a post-AI normal.

Indeed, even in cases where workers superficially choose to not acquire new skills or moving abroad, however, there could well be underlying explanations that render them by no means morally responsible for

their non-autonomous choices – for instance, the costs of re-skilling are too substantial, or the workers lack the knowledge and awareness of viable pathways towards re-skilling.

Another view is that we should hold morally blameworthy the employers who lay off subsequently structurally unemployed workers – for the detriments experienced by these workers. Firms may appear to be infringing upon the material and non-material interests of their employees by severing financial, resource, and institutional support for them – in dismissing them and replacing them with automation or offshored operations.

Yet this view falls apart given firms have no *prima facie* duty to retain existing workers, and workers have no inherent *right to employment* by their particular employer (Reiff 2015). An employer agrees to pay a worker in exchange for work, because the benefits accrued from their labour outweigh the costs of the worker's wages; an employee agrees to work for they view the benefits of employment as outweighing the costs of labour: this is a largely voluntary contractual relationship. Neither employer nor employee is to blame for the SU induced by causes that are fundamentally structural. We should thus reject the *Blame View*.

Distributive justice account

Having established both (a) and (b), we must now identify the most plausible defence of my tentative position. The sparse literature on SU nevertheless features a highly promising account in Reiff's (2015) predominantly distributive injustice-oriented analysis of structural unemployment.

Reiff anchors his account in the observation that (paid) employment plays a key role in our lives – whether it be as a source of our 'social primary goods' or 'distinctness as persons' (39), or our fulfilment of 'The desire to create […] to make something that exists outside ourselves'. He also submits that the 'collective enterprise' that is the economy must see to that no individual member is left behind when it comes to the *distribution* of the above goods, integral to a life of flourishing. Fundamentally, paid labour is 'humanising […] even if it is not fun or contains tasks that are frustrating', for the production worker, as a part of a collective enterprise, come to forge their own identity through their work (41). What is neglected in existing analytic philosophy discussions on distributive justice, Reiff posits, is that 'unemployment […] results in a festering

life-sucking wound for the individual who becomes unemployed' (42). The premise underpinning Reiff's detailed account is that questions of unemployment ought to be seen through the lens of *distributive justice*. This, in turn, builds on his (2013) earlier work exploring the relationship between exploitation and economic justice in liberal capitalist states.

A more incisive interpretation of Reiff's work would reveal that there exists a latent, relational dimension to the injustice he diagnoses in structural unemployment, to which he perhaps could pay further attention. Whilst he outlines extensively the perturbing welfare effects of unemployment for the ordinary workers – '15 times' by which 'a jobless worker's well-being declines' due to the 'loss of income alone' (39), or the more general setback to resources and capacity posed by the loss of a stable occupation – it is evident unemployment is also a socially exclusionary experience, one that leaves workers *relationally deprived* and estranged from others in their political and civic communities. Reiff observes that individual members of societies are 'engaged in some sort of joint associative enterprise' (42). Whether it be the failure on the part of associates of this large joint enterprise to show *respect* to fellow, unemployed counterparts, or the active dearth of *self-efficacy* and *self-respect* on the part of the unemployed posed by unemployment – including those who would lead lives that are otherwise above the minimal welfare threshold – clearly, what is at stake is the nature and state of the distorted relational standing between the unemployed and their employed counterparts within a social setting. As such, the harms arising from unemployment – as Reiff himself at times acknowledges – are by no means distributive only.

To see why this matters, consider the notion of 'egalitarian ethos' (Wolff 1998), which is integral to the relational egalitarian conception of justice. Social relations, standing, and bonds of trust cannot be easily distributed, if at all, across individuals. Such impossibility of distribution poses more than merely a barrier to efficacious remedy – what is really at stake here in societies with significant SU is the issue of societal *ethos*, the treatment of and attitudes directed towards the unemployed – as opposed to *mere distribution*. Respect and recognition of individuals' identities and autonomy are not goods, but are instead the embodiments of complex social processes, interactions in accordance with well-defined and constantly evolving norms, and subjective dispositions exhibited and held by social structures and individuals towards other individual (Wolff 2010). Indeed, the commitment to the non-distribution-amenability of respect undergirds recognition politics, as Honneth argues emphatically in his interchange with Fraser (Fraser and Honneth 2003). Within capitalist

democracies, the structurally unemployed are excluded from opportunities to contribute towards meaningful, value-making enterprises for which their efforts are recognised per well-defined market rules.

Two further observations can be made concerning Reiff's account – which collectively point to areas for further enquiry. Firstly, Reiff engages extensively in the discourse of *moral responsibility*. He posits that stakeholders such as the bureaucratic state, political elite, and powerful actors in positions of influence possess and ought to take up moral responsibilities to redress and provide remedies to the structurally unemployed. A worry may be that this claim moves too quickly from a claim of justice-grounded considerations and responsibilities to a claim of moral responsibility. Despite his excellent exposition, Reiff (2013, 2015) does not adequately establish why our responsibilities in relation to unemployment should be viewed as *moral* in kind.

Many social phenomena give rise to clear, emphatic forward-looking tasks and changes that must be implemented, in order for their deleterious effects to be offset. Yet this does not necessitate that the responsibilities are moral in kind. Non-moral responsibilities, too, can be binding and compelling – for instance, citizens possess clear yet non-moral responsibilities to vote in elections upon carefully considering the merits and demerits of each candidate. It would be praiseworthy of them to do so, yet they are not blameworthy for failing to do so. In the context of SU, we can grant the existence of responsibilities in redressing both the distributive and relational harms of unemployment, without thereby committing to the assignment of moral responsibility to actors.

Secondly, Reiff's account perhaps ignores the *heterogeneity of actors* involved in SU – that is, whilst the governmental apparatus certainly plays a key role in both contributing towards and potentially redressing SU, there exists a large number of alternative actors whose agency, contributions, and potential capacity for ameliorating the detriments of SU should also be acknowledged. Acemoglu and Johnson (2023) allude to the substantial role played by powerful, endowed innovation-powered entrepreneurs and oligopolistic corporations in their introduction of nascent technologies – ranging from the steam engine to digital technologies, from generative AI to robotics replicating human functions. These actors can be more than merely portentous disruptors of employment, but also contributors in the reverse direction – towards an economic logic that is more inclusive and supportive of the rights of displaced workers.

The key litmus test on injustice proposed by Reiff is that 'unemployment is unjust unless it is unreasonable to expect the government to attempt to do anything further to alleviate it' (47). Indeed, most accounts advocating the redress of unemployment (Reiff 2015; Parr 2022) tend to place particular emphasis on the role of the state. Yet it is apparent that actors beyond and outside the state can and should take up the responsibility to ameliorate the injustice that is SU. A comprehensive account of unemployment justice should do away with the *statist fixation* in the burgeoning distributive justice literature concerning unemployment – in expanding the scope of responsible agents beyond the state.

4. The structural injustice view

Having considered and rejected three approaches to assessing SU, I now turn to advancing the following thesis – that large-scale, involuntary SU is best conceptualised as structural injustice.

Per Young's (2011, 56) Social Connection Model (SCM), structural injustices arise when:

1. 'Social processes put large groups of persons under systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities'. (*Domination-deprivation*);
2. 'These processes enable others to dominate or to have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising capacities available to them'. (*Enrichment*);
3. These processes amount to 'a kind of moral wrong distinct from the wrongful action of an individual agent or the repressive policies of a state … [they] are a consequence of many individuals and institutions acting to pursue their particular goals and interests, for the most part within the limits of accepted rules and norms'. *(Non-individuation*).

Theorists has applied Young's account to contexts such as the British 'workfare' scheme (Mantouvalou 2020), European labour migration (Nuti 2019), undocumented care workers (Meghani and Eckenwiler 2009), and climate justice (Keij and van Meurs 2023). The following seeks to demonstrate that all three premises are fulfilled when it comes to the subset of SU on which we are focussing.

Domination-deprivation premise

There are two components to this premise. The first pertains to *domination*, and the latter to *deprivation* of individuals. I take the possession of 'means to develop and exercise [capacities]' here to be an *exercise concept* mapping onto a worker's ability, without excessive costs, to feasibly improve their own competitiveness and pursue desired objectives and plans pertaining to their future to a *reasonable extent*.

The adverse effects induced by technological unemployment significantly restrict the affected workers' ability to cultivate skills, self-actualise, and make stable and consistent plans about their long-term future, thereby inhibiting their ability to plan out their growth and self-enhancement (Belic 2024). Similarly, workers dislodged by offshoring and corporate restructuring often find themselves experiencing significant economic loss – Hummels et al. (2014) draws upon worker-firm data in Denmark to demonstrate that the detriments of displacement caused by offshoring are much greater when compared with displacement with other causes. Autor et al. (2014) find that low-wage workers in the US are more severely hurt by hyper-competition from Chinese imports.

Structurally unemployed workers are not always prevented by their conditions from developing their own capacities. Some resilient workers indeed manage to adapt and expand their knowledge, deepen their networks, and cultivate new skillsets such that they become employable in the long run. Yet this does not obviate the existence of large swathes of workers who have neither gained from the productivity gains spurred by the rise of new technologies and advent of globalisation, nor managed to acclimatise to a different job market (Autor, Dorn, and Hanson 2016). Over time, such prohibitive barriers will compound – the longer individuals are unemployed due to skill mismatch induced by macroeconomic trends, the more difficult it is for them to be re-employed. Long-term unemployed individuals are confronted by numerous personal, circumstantial barriers to work, such as drastically dwindling job networks and connections (Wanberg, Kanfer, and Barnas 2000) and stigma associated with unemployment (Gallie and Russell 1998). Given the additional, significant *deprivation* of social status, networks and community, the long-term unemployed could well experience not only further decrease to their welfare but also a fundamental diminution of their standing relative to others.

The *relational* aspect of the injustice confronting the structurally unemployed is particularly apparent when it comes to establishing the second component – domination – of the premise. Per Young (as Allen [2008, 160] puts it), domination is 'an institutional or structural constraint on self-determination'. In her critique of contemporary capitalism, Young further observes that 'increasingly the activities of everyday work and life come under rationalized bureaucratic control, subjecting people to the discipline of authorities and experts in many areas of life' (Young 1990, 76).

The lack of employment deprives individuals of the ability to live their lives as participatory agents who can meaningfully contribute towards the broader social fabric through having their work efforts recognised through a formal system of financial currency and rewards (Bryan 2021). Unlike Bryan, who identifies such relations of domination in primarily the unemployed during economic crises, I argue domination can arise even at times of vibrant economic booms, amongst those find their skill-sets no longer in demand by their employers.

The structurally unemployed comprise *large groups* under threat by the social processes that culminate in their displacement from their previous jobs. In this respect, SU contrasts sharply against more incidental causes of unemployment that do not arise from underlying structural processes rendering fundamentally unattractive or obsolete the skills possessed by workers – e.g. individual choices, bad job performance or behaviour, or a particular corporation's decision to downsize to maximise shareholder revenue.

Enrichment premise

As highlighted above, the root causes of SU could also be beneficial for critical groups of individuals. Automation, for instance, benefits workers whose marginal productivity benefits from automation, consumers who stand to gain from cheaper and more varied goods, and producers who are more cost-efficient and thus benefit from increased margins. These benefits can certainly contribute towards their own *self-development*. Autor (2015) notes, 'strong complementarities between automation and labor' can 'increase productivity, raise earnings, and augment demand for labor'; more specifically, hitherto wage gains have gone 'disproportionately to those at the top and at the bottom of the income and skill distribution, not to those in the middle' (5 and 10).

Similarly, offshoring can benefit two sets of workers – those working in the newly created jobs in the economies to which the manufacturing

operations are relocated, but also some workers in the original home economy, through improvements in net productivity and lowering production costs (Görg 2011).[5] The economy's shifting in a more service-led direction also enriches and creates further opportunities for those who are trained or deemed more desirable in a financially oriented and tertiary sector-dominated job market. Many of the processes giving rise to SU are vital in enabling firms to cut costs and invest in alternative, revenue-generating technologies, measures, and strategies. Indeed, parts of the financial dividends of automation and offshoring go into technological research and development, which in turn can be helpful in improving product quality for individual consumers.

Yet these background factors also enable employers to *dominate* workers who initially remain employed – who must now grapple with significantly reduced leverage and ability to reason for desired wages and working conditions. Leduc and Liu (2023, 4) point to 'increased automation probability weaken[ing] workers' bargaining power' through reducing levels of unionization, which has rendered wage growth weak despite 'unemployment reach[ing] historically low levels in the United States'. Estlund (2023) points to 'both fissuring and automation […] that make it easier for private sector employers to replace employees either with other workers or with machines' (437). The reduced market power of workers implies even more limited bargaining prowess on the part of unemployed workers, who are faced with choosing between the significantly reduced wages and packages offered to them due to automation, or joblessness.

Non-individuation premise

We have already seen in our discussion of prospective blame attribution plenty of justification for the *non-individuation premise*. Across most instances of SU, 'there is no identifiable perpetrator, and the injustice is the sum of multiple agents' nonblameworthy actions' (McKeown 2021, 4). SU is a gradual, cumulative process. Automation or the structural shift from manufacturing to service are not processes arrived at by one or two individuals. The decision to financialise, outsource corporate management to third-party consultancies, or automate may appear to be areas over which leaders and CEOs of firms have more say – but even

[5]The first prong of this claim is fairly uncontested. Yet the second prong – concerning effects on domestic unemployment in the home country – is more controversial. See Ottaviano, Peri, and Wright (2013) and OECD (2024).

then, these actors are not behaving immorally or impermissibly in pursuing moves that generate significant revenue: a core part of their contractual obligations towards shareholders (Friedman 1968).

Yet the absence of clearly identifiable, morally responsible individuals does not preclude the existence of what McKeown (2021, 5) terms to be '*political* responsibility' as 'shared by all agents connected to structural injustice'; it is 'nonblameworthy, forward-looking and entails collective action'.

A rejoinder to this view stems from Atenasio (2019)'s critique of Young's account. He holds that so-called structural injustices can be reduced into three categories: systemic unfairness (e.g. sweatshops and exploitative labour), distributive inequality (e.g. an ineffective housing market leading to homelessness), and structures that harm non-consenting third parties by rendering them worse-off. Of these three categories, perhaps SU would fall into the third category. Here, there may be individuals engaging in what McKeown (2021) terms 'avoidable structural injustice', where 'there are powerful agents with the capacity to change unjust structures, but they fail to do so' (5). They can be blameworthy – and hence morally responsible – for such failures.

One may then argue that government officials and politicians who could have implemented better protections for employed workers and lobbied for more resources to be directed to re-training and re-skilling programmes, yet chose not to, can be deemed morally responsible in virtue of their negligent omission (McGaughey 2022). Alternatively, powerful employers who could have equipped their employees with better and more employable skills, in ensuring that they can be employed elsewhere, yet opted not to do so – are seemingly purportedly morally responsible given their failure to act otherwise (Li 2022).

Whilst this claim certainly has a kernel of truth in select cases, the trouble with applying this principle to most contexts is that there are often conflicting priorities to which both governments and employers must attend – for instance, governmental resources allocated towards re-training could have been spent on supporting venture capital by seeding promising and high-potential early-stage firms or subsidising strategically important industries. Employers may not possess ample resources to re-train their workers, and there are clear market incentives to cut costs and thus cut out expenditure that is not immediately conducive towards firm profits. It would be reasonable to posit that the purported consequences on employment arising from the trade-offs with which private and public actors alike must grapple, do not give rise to moral blameworthiness.

So, who, really, are responsible?

It is the actors who are *connected* to structural injustices, who must take up the responsibilities to redress them, as Young (2011) puts it. What does *connection* entail here? In considering four different interpretations of *connection* – as existential, dependent, causal, and reproduction of structures, McKeown (2018) argues the fourth is the most plausible. She differentiates between two kinds of causation – namely, *attributive causation*, in which individuals can be held morally responsible (liable) for directly causing some deviation from the norm, 'with voluntariness and knowledge of what they were doing' (495), and *explanatory causation,* where background conditions facilitate or explain a particular event.

McKeown (2018, 500) argues that the *social connection model* should assign political responsibility to all who reproduce man-made *explanatory causes* of injustice. An individual reproduces a *background structure* by 'acting within it' through their actions. She raises the example of a consumer purchasing a T-shirt in a shop. He is not *causing* sweatshop labour but instead *reproducing* it through consuming in a sweatshop-enabled global supply chain. Reproduction does not feature a causally significant contribution to the particular injustice per se – instead, precisely because harms can follow from 'the accumulated outcomes of the actions of masses of individuals enacting their own projects' (Young 2011, 62), without coordination or intention for harm to result, it is vital that we shift our attention from assigning moral blame to identifying the socio-historical conditions under which individuals act.

Take automation for example. There are several key, non-exhaustive ways in which actors may reproduce the structure of the *automation-based economy*, even if they are not directly involved with causing the displacement of workers through automation. These ways include *consuming* automation-produced goods and services; *working in* automating corporations, as leadership, managers, or rank-and-file workers; *deriving tax revenue* from transactions involving automation or resultant goods and services; *participating* in public discourse legitimating automation or *advancing* deregulation and policies that render workers more vulnerable to material, psychosocial, and relational deprivation caused by mechanisation of labour. The reproducing act may not be causally traceable to the specific harm experienced by the impacted, unemployed worker. Yet it is through such an act that the agent contributes towards the continued maintenance of the *explanatory causes* that serve as the background conditions of injustice and thus accrues responsibilities they must discharge.

Finally, those who reproduce the background conditions of large-scale SU are generally aware that they are acting within a relevant structure – the consumer who buys a cheap chair from a furniture shop knows that it is unlikely to be hand-made; the investor betting on the successes of particular technology stocks is well aware that the transformations introduced by these corporations could well eliminate tens of thousands of jobs for those who are not qualified or trained for the post-automation era. The detriments of unemployment are hence by no means *unforeseeable* and *unexpected* – they are known products of man-made explanatory causes.

5. Towards a reproduction-centric role-ideal model (RRIM)

Young's account has come under significant criticisms for struggling to establish what exactly individuals *should* do about structural injustice – the worry is that it fails to action-guide individuals properly given its vagueness (Neuhäuser 2014; Barry and Macdonald 2016; Zheng 2018). Of course, she does note that individuals' responsibilities can be adjusted relative to one's 'privilege, interests, power, and collective ability', which reflect the 'social positions agents occupy in relation to one another within the structural processes' they are to change (Young 2011, 144). McKeown (2021, 8) suggests that Young 'intended the concept of political responsibility to be discretionary and open-ended', leaving room for agents to judge what the best path to the outcome should be, given that they are the ones who can best appraise their position in relation to structural injustice. Yet for those looking for more specificity and clarity, the Youngian approach may not be satisfactory.

How, then, should SU be tackled? This article seeks not to offer precise policy prescriptions. Yet what it aims to provide is some sense of direction – one that sheds insight on the broad approach with which we should tackle the question of praxis.

The role-ideal model (RIM)

As I see it, the practical upshots of the structural injustice of SU are best developed through drawing upon elements in Zheng's (2018) *Role-Ideal Model* (RIM). Notably, Zheng articulates the RIM as a related but distinct model of forward-looking responsibility, to the Young-McKeown approach to responsibility. Yet both models are anchored in the objective of addressing structural injustices. Zheng argues that 'for every social role R occupied by an individual P, a role-ideal is P's interpretation of how she could best satisfy the expectations constituting R'. Roles can manifest in

many forms, with all individuals occupying multiple roles at any point – they could include 'bystander' or 'bus rider' (contingent roles), 'woman' or 'Muslim' (more diffuse, generally applicable roles). In tackling injustices, individuals must draw upon resources offered by their roles, perform actions in accordance with their role-ideals, and approximate their role ideals. Social roles are 'rich in content, which allows them to be action-guiding' (875, 879).

The RIM also provides us with a means of tackling the *statist fixation*, as discussed in relation to Reiff's account above. Whilst the state is an instrumental actor in the praxis of remedial justice, an excess emphasis upon it inhibits – unduly – the room for other actors to play a role in ameliorating the effects of SU.

The reproduction-centric amendment

One worry is that there may be role-ideals that are innately contributory towards injustices – whether it be the automation-induced adverse impacts on workers, or other injustices. Furthermore, Zheng's highly capacious conception of roles grants that all individuals are bound and shaped by a multitude of different roles at once yet offers no explicit metric as to how to weigh, compare, merge, or evaluate their desirability (and undesirability). There may be more ideal roles that individuals should aspire towards, and suboptimal roles that individuals should eschew. Some specification concerning 'good' and 'bad' roles is vital for the RIM to be useful in real-life contexts where injustices require well-considered responses, contra Zheng (2018, 883)'s suggestion, 'it is not the job of a theory of responsibility to issue such judgments'.

I hence propose the introduction of a reproduction-centric amendment to the RIM:

Reproduction-centric Role-Ideal Model (RRIM). At any given time, individuals possess different role-ideals R_1, R_2, R_3, … R_k based on disparate roles. Individuals should perform actions according to their role-ideals, approximate them, and draw upon them for resources.

Three key principles follow:

1. The more a role-ideal R_k reproduces the background causes of structural injustice, the more the role should be de-prioritised, and even rejected outright, by the agent. Not all roles are desirable, and the agent should discern between roles that have affirmative, detractive, or neutral effects on the occurrence of injustices.

2. The more a role-ideal R_k enables the agent to *redress* the reproduction of injustice, the more the role should be drawn upon for resources and directions by the agent in so doing. Some roles are more desirable than others, especially in the context of redressing injustice.
3. The more an agent's role-ideals R_1, R_2, R_3, … R_k *can* reproduce or redress the causes of (structural) injustice in the future, the more forward-looking responsibility the agent should bear to redress the injustice. This potential-centric claim harks back to Young's parameter of *power* – the more powerful an agent is in relation to structural injustice, the greater their responsibility to redress it.

The RRIM retains the explanatory richness (through roles) and alignment with the interests, resources, and natural skillsets of agents that Zheng's RIM offers, whilst also reflecting the centrality of reproduction to structural injustice per McKeown's interpretation of the Youngian SCM. This account rules out explicitly *unjust roles* whilst providing discrete metrics on the roles that individuals should prioritise. It also incorporates Young's SCM's parameter on power, specifying the rationale for responsibilities to vary from agent to agent.

Responsible agents bear the responsibility to *redress* the reproduction of injustice. *Opposing* the reproduction of injustice can take place across at least two dimensions:

(1) removing the root causes of their occurrence – e.g. addressing existing episodes of preventing structural unemployment, or preventing them from arising in the future, or
(2) remedying the harmful effects they cause – e.g. offsetting the relational deprivation of such injustices.

These two prongs would prove crucial in our attempts to tackle the structural injustice of SU.

The RRIM in practice

Let us consider how the RRIM thus plays out across two distinct contexts:

1. *Education*

Much emphasis has been placed in existing literature on the efficacy – or lack thereof – of re-skilling programmes for structurally unemployed

individuals (Coles and Masters 2020). Indeed, evidence shows that education plays a key role in enabling unemployed individuals to successfully navigate re-employment (Riddell and Song 2011; Zimmer 2016). US President Joe Biden's American Jobs Plan advocated 'creat[ing] good-quality jobs that pay prevailing wages in safe and healthy workplaces', and 'train[-ing] Americans for the jobs of the future' (White House 2021). New, targeted workforce training programmes have been rolled out in supporting workers' transitioning to jobs in manufacturing, construction, and clean energy sectors (Boushey 2024). Industry-specific skills upgrading aimed to prepare unemployed and under-skilled workers for skilled positions have been demonstrably successful within select contexts in the US.[6]

On the other hand, perhaps more attention should be paid towards pre-emptive and preventative training, undertaken with the objective of building up a more resilient and automation-proof workforce. Educators in schools and universities possess responsibilities to equip their students with a wider range of skills in face of the prospective automation and the manufacturing-to-service transition in the economy. Bughin et al. (2018) have pointed to the importance of higher cognitive and emotional skills as crucial in enabling malleability and competitiveness amidst mass automation.

Education cannot be conceived of as a merely state-driven exercise – teachers and faculty in private schools and universities, which are not under the direct administration of governments, also bear the role-centric responsibilities arising from their reproducing the background structure of the *knowledge-based economy*, through working at venerated institutions shaping what is construed socially as valuable or useful work. Schools, both public and private alike, must transform their curricula to equip students with skills that cannot be easily replicated through automation or offshoring. Aoun (2018) makes the argument that a 'robot-proof' education requires the imbuing of students with creativity, mental elasticity, and the development of data literacy, technological literacy, and human literacy.

2. *Corporations*

The workplace can be a constructive lever of remedial change – especially in off-setting select harms induced by unemployment. Sethi (2021) makes a compelling case that 'no one has more experience – or

[6]For more literature on this matter, see Roder and Elliott (2020) and Fein, Dastrup, and Burnett (2021).

more at stake – in the nation's economic health than its business leaders'. Singling out Chief Human Resources Officers in corporations, he reasons that human resources leaders can play leading roles in ameliorating the unemployment stemming from the pandemic-induced digital transition, through working with schools to offer training, job shadowing, and internship opportunities; as well as community organisations to drive forward the re-skilling of demographics vulnerable to displacement by automation. As chief actors shaping industrial and economic norms, corporate leaders should play a more forward-oriented role in leveraging their roles in building a more unemployment-proof, resilient workforce.

Business management can comprehensively re-envisage the future of work in an era where automation will likely outstrip many of human employees in select functionalities (Spencer 2023). Berg (2024) has advocated that corporations consider 'redeploy[ing] those staff at risk of technological unemployment to other jobs within the same organization'. Positive workplace intervention targeted at burn-out (Cohen et al. 2023), combining both resilience cultivation and mindfulness training, is vital in bolstering the ability of workers – in the event of sudden unemployment layoffs – to cope with the drastic changes to their own circumstances. Re-skilling programmes can also be provided by private corporations seeking to fulfil their corporate social responsibility. Interim work opportunities for the unemployed can be made available by private corporations and non-profit organisations, in conjunction with or independently from the state (via subsidies), in the form of workfare programmes (World Economic Forum 2018; Bukartaite and Hooper 2023).

The *relational deprivation* experienced by the unemployed can be remedied through the efforts of trained professionals and counsellors retained by workplaces to provide emotional support to individuals experiencing significant mental distress, social deprivation and low self-esteem, amongst other syndromes (Dmitrijeva and Razgale 2016; Lewis 2022). Empathetic and deep conversations with the structurally unemployed – even without the specific agenda of helping them find new jobs elsewhere – could go a long way in their sense of membership and participation in the collective enterprise that is the society.

The above demonstrates that the government is by no means the only actor that is responsible for advancing preventive and pre-emptive measures in the wake of persisting SU. Private actors have responsibilities to support, assist, and amplify such initiatives, through providing internship opportunities, funding for employee up-skilling, and re-skilling

training for the unemployed. Such responsibilities do not purely stem from general, vaguely defined consequentialist duties, but are in fact grounded in the forward-looking political responsibilities towards structural injustices, as highlighted above. More importantly, the unique *sui generis* nature of each role gives rise to role-specific responsibilities and idiosyncrasies that must be harnessed by the individual agent, to deliver the maximal impact. The RIM hence serves as a helpful complement to state-based accounts of responsibilities over SU.

Whilst a corporate executive and a university professor may both bear responsibilities to mitigate the structural injustice of SU, they must undertake distinct actions in going about accomplishing this objective (i.e. the executive should advance more pro-reskilling programmes within the company, whilst the professor should spend more time teaching and imparting non-automatable skills to their students). Additionally, they should ensure that they redress the structural injustice in a manner that is sensitive to the extent and degree to which they have – and continue to – reproduced the background causes of such injustices, drawing upon the above tenets of the RRIM.

Over-demandingness objection

In applying the RRIM to SU, we have arrived at the conclusion that responsible individual agents – within the remit of their roles – should contribute their share to off-setting either the occurrence of SU (especially in instances of technology-induced unemployment, which can be reduced significantly through bolstering the competitiveness and resilience of individual workers), or the specific resultant harms. A key proviso, of course, is that such responsibilities are by no means overriding – nor should they be construed as a convenient excuse for the state to abscond from their responsibilities.

A fundamental objection yet remains – that even with this, the RRIM remains far too demanding when it comes to SU. This view holds that ordinary teachers and principals, mid-management in corporations, or other identified non-state actors, should not have the additional responsibilities foisted upon them, to redress the structural injustice of SU. This may impose undue costs (mental or financial) upon them, as well as asking them to venture above and beyond what they should be expected to do as citizens.[7]

[7] I thank Avia Pasternak for raising this objection with me.

I offer three rejoinders to this worry. Firstly, there should indeed be a *costliness ceiling* to the demands arising from RRIM, which would vary from individual to individual, pending their level of financial, economic, and material wherewithal and resourcefulness. No individual agent should be required to forego personally or morally important commitments to discharge their forward-looking responsibilities vis-à-vis SU; the wealthier an individual is, however, the 'higher' in absolute terms the ceiling in question.

Secondly, per the third principle of the RRIM, the more *capable* of redressing injustice an individual agent is, the more they can be expected to do – and the converse also holds true: if an agent cannot, within reasonable feasibility limits, bring about fixes to SU and its effects, it would be unjustified for us to hold them responsible – even if in only a forward-looking manner.

Thirdly, structural injustice often calls for a solution that features competent, capable collective action. This is indeed a key vision underpinning Young's (2011) theory of change; Endo (2024) terms this the advocacy of structural change though 'collective action as democratic practice' – whereby the crafting of democratic institutions from the bottom-up is pivotal in the re-engineering and transformation of structural processes, to resist societal domination.

It could seem overtly demanding to ask individuals to act as atomistic units in stymying the effects of SU. It is much less daunting and unreasonable, however, for us to ask that individuals work in tandem with others, in collectively advancing redresses to persisting structural injustices. In short, through setting a limit to costs accrued by the individual, taking into consideration the individual's capacity, and encouraging the discharging of responsibilities through collective action, the RRIM can indeed offset the worry of being over-demanding.

6. Conclusion

SU has long been assumed to be a given fact of macroeconomics. To be clear, individually caused, voluntary, or seasonal SU is not a subject of normative concern. Yet when the occurrence of SU gives rise to deprivation on material, psychosocial, and relational fronts, there is clearly a need to take seriously such conditions. Structural injustice is indeed present in these cases. Agents reproducing the background structures of SU must in turn bear the forward-looking responsibilities to both remedy and prevent SU.

None of this requires that the government ought to halt or ban automation, offshoring, financialisation, or the transition from manufacturing to service employment that have caused the present crises at hand. There is no intrinsic conflict between these continual advances and ensuring that present unemployed workers are remedied and afforded the opportunities to re-integrate into workforce, or that future workers are not displaced by structural forces.

In focussing on the reproduction of injustices, the RRIM articulates a helpful, anchoring guide to action for all stakeholders – from government to citizens, from private corporations to non-governmental organisations. The role-based theory offers instrumental upshots on how different agents' forward-oriented responsibilities vary in accordance with their positionalities and situatedness in relation to the background conditions of SU. Indeed, there is much that corporations, education entities, and even ordinary citizens can and should do – and that are within their feasibility limits and not excessively costly. We, too, have the agency and responsibility to do more for the structurally unemployed – at present or in the future.

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