

THEORETICAL ARTICLE

Systemic Rejection Theory: Dismantling Harmful Social Systems

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Abstract

Social structures that are highly stigmatized yet persist in modern times often lead us to believe that social change is a slow and arduous feat to achieve. However, this paper introduces Systemic Rejection Theory (SRT), a theoretical framework that explains how deeply seated harmful systems, such as patriarchy, are sustained by a triadic structure: mental (passive public acceptance), cultural (active reinforcement through media and/or tradition), and economic (tangible material incentives or dependencies). SRT proposes that with the implementation of social techniques to manipulate any one of the aforementioned pillars, change is seen across all three dimensions. When one pillar is actively and systematically rejected and demolished, the remaining structure loses coherence, leading the system to recede into the "imaginary realm"—a space where it no longer affects lived reality. Further into the paper, cases from the past that illustrate how targeted dismantling of one pillar will lead to the spontaneous disintegration of others are recalled for application in contemporary times. Lastly, while SRT advocates dismantling harmful social structures, it also has an inverse model; that is, preserving moral values and modernizing effective systems that benefit humanity may be sustained or brought into the "reality realm" by reinforcing the three pillars. This paper concludes by outlining strategies that can be implemented to enable both disintegration and preservation in the transformation of social realities.

Keywords: Structuralism, Systemic Rejection Theory, Patriarchy, Preservationism.

Introduction

Despite attention from activism and decades of education and policy reforms, patriarchy persists while being publicly condemned. Why and how is this possible? The institutional inertia is on the side of progress, but formal reforms cannot practically outrun the dynamics of what society thinks. Implicit bias is harder to legislate. In classic social theory, scholars like Émile Durkheim looked at "social facts" with coercive power and stated that individuals are bound by external factors[1]. Karl Marx located these structures primarily in the economy and proposed that the material base is what determines social reality. Michel Foucault later redefined the power introduced by Durkheim and decentralized it, offering a few ways to dismantle such systems. However, with each of these frameworks, the same gap exists: the dimension of the problem is isolated onto a single critical insight. These theories do not recognize the interdependence of all three factors—the mental, cultural, and tangible pillars, which uphold any social structure. SRT, on the other hand, suggests a straightforward approach to dis-

mantling harmful social systems through three interdependent pillars. We will explore, in further essays, how actively rejecting a single pillar forces the entire structure to collapse. All social structures that cease to exist become a part of the "imaginary realm." Examples of ideas that belong there are the Flat Earth Theory, which was dismantled with heavy scientific proof; witch hunts, as institutional practices have largely faded in the West, though certain beliefs persist in parts of the Global South; phrenology (the study of the human skull to determine personality), which was debunked by neurology; bloodletting; geocentrism; etc. Some ideologies are also known to have been reborn into the "reality realm." For example, feminism and environmentalism were marginalized and widely dismissed in their early stages; both are now mainstream movements in the modern era. Again, democratic socialism, though marginalized during the neoliberal era, regained mainstream acceptance in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Observing the imaginary realm and the reality realm, the similarity found in all of these ideologies is the triadic model of pillars,



which is present in all of them as long as they have not faded. This paper proposes that the critical dissimilarity between dead and hibernating systems may lie in the presence of what I call 'pillar memory.' 'Pillar memory,' as defined here, loosely parallels the idea of residual cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986), but within a dismantling framework[2]. The systems that went into the imaginary realm with all their pillars demolished remained dead, but the ones that were reborn had a subconscious memory of at least one pillar, be it cultural artifacts, lingering economic effects, or suppressed attention. Records of historical events suggest that once an idea is actively rejected by a critical mass, it tends to disintegrate rapidly. For instance, belief in witch trials diminished quickly after judicial and public rejection in Enlightenment-era Europe (Monter 2002)[3]. It is fascinating to find that the mind does not feel the need to question something widely accepted, but once the idea suffers active rejection, it crumbles in a surprisingly quick and thorough manner.

Intention is the prime determining factor in the death and rebirth of systems. For instance, despite cultural ridicule of astrology in many scientific circles, the lack of institutional intention to dismantle it has allowed its economic and cultural pillars to survive. Let us also take the example of feminism and the organic reinforcement of media and protest culture in the last century. It hibernated with a pillar memory of economic effects related to it, and once the other pillar of culture was reinforced, this ideology was reborn. Intentional disintegration was also the reason due to which feminism was initially declined; however, the economic effects persisted due to a lack of intention.

The goal of SRT is to track these unique changes in a way all can comprehend. We have a better understanding of how a system collapses under the pressure of active rejection. After that, one or more pillars spontaneously dismantle, except in cases of pillar memory, where a pillar remains significant due to a lack of intention, and hence, these exceptions may be reborn if another pillar is reinforced through active acceptance.

Findings

The findings of this study are theoretical but grounded in historical references and evidence from cultures across the world. First, the analysis demonstrates that the fall and rise of social structures are not random; more importantly, social changes can be tracked to predict dismantling and reforming processes and potentially manipulate them toward social benefit. Historical evidence shows that collective intention is the decisive factor that causes and accelerates systemic breakdown. Second, the findings suggest that every social system is supported by three interdependent pillars—cultural, mental, and economic. Due to this triadic interdependence, the fall of one pillar can lead to the dismantling of the others and, ultimately, the collapse of the whole system. Third, social systems can be brought back from the "imaginary realm" under certain conditions. If the dismantling of a past system lacked collective intention, one or more pillars may remain dormant as mental, cultural, or economic structures, forcing the system into a "hibernating" phase, which differs from complete collapse. In this phase, systems are too fragile to be considered part of the "reality realm," as they lack significant tangible effects on society. Finally, by actively reinforcing one or more pillars of a "hibernating" social system with collective intention, it may be possible to restore it to the "reality realm" and return it to full power with tangible social effects. These findings highlight the explanatory power of Systemic Rejection Theory (SRT) in capturing both the fragility and resilience of social systems.

Discussion

System Comparison with Theoretical Grounding

Classic sociological frameworks have long attempted to explain and solve the lingering systemic power; those theories revolved around a singular root cause, be it economic, cultural, or mental. Such a reductionist approach fails to address the triadic interdependency

of the factors due to which these structures are upheld.

Émile Durkheim's idea of functionalism primarily states that a society is shaped through the equilibrium of social facts such as norms and values that influence behaviour. However, this framework overlooks conflict and oppression and advocates for natural social stability. and Durkheim's notion of "social facts" largely ignores the norms and cultural implications that are paired with tangible economic sustenance. Durkheim's notion emphasises mental adherence to social norms as external, coercive forces.

Karl Marx's primary focus was on class struggle; he described how the economic base determines the cultural superstructure. His conflict theory and historical materialism made the economy the base of society. Again, this ideology fails to explain why oppressed classes may adopt or accept harmful systems even if there is no economic gain from them.

The concept of discourse and biopower introduced by Michel Foucault says that, for instance, a prison or a school shapes an individual not just through force but through norms and surveillance[4]. Foucault's objective post-structuralism, which was to show decentralised power, even covers mental and cultural control. However, his framework failed to establish the domino effect when one of the pillars is undone; it also struggled to explain the endurance of systems through materialistic independence. Some also criticised the theory for being overly abstract and lacking a clear model that explains collapse sustenance.

Unlike its predecessors, SRT addresses every factor and shows how systemic stability is achieved when all three pillars are upheld. It further introduces the concepts of active rejection and how it collapses structures into permanent stagnation or a latent state when pillar memory persists. SRT can explain both the fragility and resilience through the concept of intention, which earlier studies struggled to explain.

Intentional action is the crucial factor that determines whether a system survives or collapses. Jared Diamond, in his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, emphasises that societies capable of making anticipatory decisions based on environmental or structural feedback often avoid collapse[5]. For instance, in the 16th century, Japan implemented intentional forest management policies (under the Tokugawa shogunate), reversing environmental degradation. In contrast to success, the Norse settlers in Greenland could not move on from their European farming identity, but rather than adapting to Inuit practices, leading to systemic failure caused by environmental mismatch due to cultural rigidity (Diamond 2005). These examples highlight how the presence or absence of collective intent greatly influences systemic endurance or disintegration.

Direction of Integration

Case Studies

Let us further discover how intention and active rejection caused the ingrained systems to fall apart with historical evidence. That is, we will explore cases where activism and rejection dismantled all three pillars.

With the explicit aim to abolish feudalism, the French revolutionary movement targeted the economic pillar of the ancien régime. It was soon decreed that the feudal regime was to be dismantled in its entirety. Here, intent broke the pillar of tangible economic value and hence dismantled the whole system of class privilege.

Gandhi's non-violent movements intentionally targeted the thoughts of the powerful mass (e.g., the Salt March, 1930) and made the century-old cultural pillar collapse, ultimately forcing Britain to grant India's independence.

Similar activism was seen in African-American movements, where legal challenges and grassroots activism, coupled with normalization through media, led to the collapse of both of pillars. Unfortunately, tangible effects persist due to a lack of collective intention; however, the Civil Rights Act (1964) and Voting Rights Act (1965) are big wins.

The Polish Solidarity movement was an intentional struggle against communism, a culturally sound and economically tangible pillar[6]. Solidarity's clear purpose directly attacked the communist regime by exposing its false claims and hence dismantled Poland's authoritarian system in a peaceful manner.

I would also like to mention Lotta Femminista (1973), who showcased women's unpaid domestic labor in the spotlight of shame[7]. This was among the first protest posters against the struggle for wages for housework. This instance illustrates how socially conscious movements can force long-held cultural pillars to collapse (gender bias) through actively dismantling the pillar of economic effects.

In essence, these examples showcase how intention and active rejection of at least one pillar are crucial in demolishing a social structure in its entirety. If one foundational pillar falls, the system is seen to collapse. In this context, we can take the chaos under Maoist China's rigid social structures as an example of how Deng Xiaoping intentionally focused on market economies during a period of cultural revolution and instability. Reinforcement of the economic pillar resulted in the ease of the other pillars and saved the system from a certain economic breakdown. Again, hyperinflation in Zimbabwe or Cambodia under "Pol Pot" (eradicating religion, education, and trade) illustrates that removing the economic pillar may precipitate social breakdown. In a general approach, scholars emphasize the integration of cultural and social values with progress in the economy to ensure stability; nations that deliberately strengthen one pillar often restore social cohesion in its entirety.

Hofstede argued that "a society's cultural values lead to stability and consistency over time[8]." This implies how cultural norms, thought patterns, and worldviews, when intact, directly buttress politics and the economy. Anthropologists add to this point, noting that an economy cannot function outside social and cultural concepts (Polanyi 2001)[9]. In other words, social concepts bear a triadic structure; the embedded effects of culture and mentality in an economy confirm this. In the context of the sustenance of pillars, an international development review underscores how mental values and economic practices co-evolve. Societies "must consider local... religious and ethical paradigms" in planning growth (Tamas 2007)[10]. Classic sociology also supports this approach.[11] Parsons' AGIL Model predicts systemic breakdown when one function of AGIL is neglected, concurring with the interdependent balance among these pillars.

Death by Rejectionism vs. Hibernation by Rejectionism

Earlier in this paper, we discovered quite a few examples of either economic, cultural, or mental pillars' collapse and hence social breakdowns. After one more interesting example of such, we will move on to a few systems that hibernated and were reborn.

A widespread, heinous social crime in 13th-century Bengal in India was the practice of Sati. It involved a widow being burned alive on her deceased husband's funeral pyre. Young girls married at an early age were very often coerced into this practice. Devotees claimed that this was an act of religion and faith. However, this act was not only immoral and equivalent to murder but also threatened severe economic effects due to the depletion of the number of young females and the destruction of natural harmony. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and William Carey emerged as important figures in trying to stop Sati. Roy studied Hindu texts and scriptures and found no evidence of rules describing the need to engage in this act. This changed the moral background of the whole situation. Many commoners grew fearful of performing Sati, believing it was no longer a religious duty and thus morally punishable. However, important Hindu factions (like Dharma Sabha) tried their best to stop the legal ban (by showing a conflict with non-interference in religious acts) of Sati[12]. However, with efforts from the then Governor General Lord Bentinck and Roy's substantial evidence of the act not

being religious, the Privy Council deemed this practice illegal; over time, this act completely disappeared with the complete collapse of all pillars, starting with the cultural one. This example shows the interdependence of the pillars as suggested by the SRT, and it also shows the effectiveness of the collapse when one of the pillars is actively rejected with collective intention from a major percentage of society.

There are cases in history where social structures, apart from systems and norms, were reborn after a long hibernation. Let us explore some linguistic and cultural revivals[13]. Hebrew is one such language that was strictly used for liturgical purposes, with practically no native speakers. In the 19th century, pioneering Zionists (notably Eliezer Ben-Yehuda) started reviving Hebrew as an everyday native language for Jews in Israel and Palestine[14]. By the mid-20th century, Modern Hebrew was fully reformed and used as a native language and later even as Israel's national language. A similar rebirth was seen in New Zealand with the Māori Cultural Renaissance. In the 1970s, the Māori community began the cultural revival to preserve their practices and language. The community introduced Māori-language schools (Kura Kaupapa Māori), broadcasting services, and the implementation of the community's morals in daily activities. This movement was primarily aimed at counteracting the effects of colonization, but it also served the purpose of promoting the Māori community.

Interestingly, in both the aforementioned examples, all three pillars were simultaneously reinforced. However, the active economic reinforcement was the strongest (creating a comprehensive dictionary, coining useful terms, and promoting Hebrew education in the former case; education and media institutions' influence in the latter case); and following the interdependency of the pillars, the culture and mental pillars were spontaneously reinforced, as well as already actively being accepted. We can also mention the growth of Celtic culture (Ireland and Scotland) in the early 20th century and Yiddish culture (United States), which were similarly preserved as a sign of and to keep the dignity of language and culture alive amongst the younger generations.

In SRT, a critical dimension of collapse, whether a system dies completely or goes into a latent phase, is the type of rejection it was treated with. There may be a few different classifications of mass rejections in this context: active rejection, passive rejection, and collective rejection. When the intention of the majority or the whole society collectively rejects an idea with the collapse of at least one pillar, the system is not observed to naturally revive. This is the powerful effect of collective rejection on harmful social systems; the inverse model has the same effects on systems that are in need of being preserved. SRT also draws strength from active rejection, that is, intentional and coordinated efforts through mass media, law, protest, or discourse in order to delegitimize and dismantle a specific system. SRT advocates for active rejection, as it is the only form of rejection that ensures a system's entry into the imaginary realm. While passive rejection, which shows as neglect, silence, or withdrawal in belief, might be called "slow abandonment," it risks leaving the system hanging in a hibernating or mutating state. Recognizing the type of rejection and linking policies or mass protests greatly heightens the extent of every action.

The last paragraph also opens a place for us to consider the limitations of SRT. The model of the framework offered through this theory is powerful and helps understand systemic shifts clearly. However, scholars caution that real-world changes observed in a system may be far more complex. For example, Kemp (2009) argued that the non-linearity and unpredictability of a social structure "must be backed up by appropriate evidence[15]." Diep and Kaufman et al. (2020) note that system models often "oversimplify the... dynamics" of social conflict. In practice, changes are seen to be blended and partial and even involve feedback loops; some systems may even adapt rather than die outright, so rejected ideas linger in mutated forms. Critical systems thinkers (e.g., Jackson 2000) caution against ignoring the context of every case[16]. However, rather than strictly limiting SRT,

the insights from various scholars strengthen it by making the concept even more dynamic and providing a multi-layered approach to understanding systemic resilience and rupture. The inherent properties of rejection, intention, and triadic interdependence, as proposed by SRT, remain valuable tools for understanding systemic changes and informing various actions to influence them.

Snuffing Out Pillar Memory and Sustaining Pillars

In the context of SRT, pillar memory refers to the remaining content in a pillar of a latent or hibernating social system after it collapsed. Pillar memory may exist as suppressed cultural, economic, or mental norms, texts, ideas, and institutions as traces of the system. This lingering pillar memory is created through a lack of collective intention when a system collapses or when there is a lack of active rejection in the process. Leaving pillar memory unchecked is, practically, risking the re-emergence of a harmful social system. Inversely, reinforcing pillar memory with active acceptance and other methods can bring back beneficial social systems. Pillar memory is not necessarily a harmful object; rather, we should heed changes in pillar memory with neutrality as we try to remove the memory of harmful systems and also use it to try to reinforce a pillar of a beneficial system.

The relevance of pillar memory lies in its dichotomy: it may naturally reinforce a pillar and hence reintegrate a system through nostalgia, misinformation, or convenience. For instance, after the collapse of colonialism, various post-colonial nations and societies still practised classist structures. Addressing pillar memory is crucial, especially in the case of harmful systems. The pillar memory of colonization being used corruptly leaves a risk of it entering the reality realm once again. On the other hand, dormant beliefs can also reactivate a system through active reinforcement of any of the pillars. There almost always exists some pillar memory post-abolition, and when kept untreated, it is through actions such as media romanticization (e.g., idealizing monarchies and rigid gender roles), lack of education or misinformation leading to blind trust, and even political manipulation and populist agendas.

Let us go over some SRT-driven strategies that can be applied in the real world to eliminate the residual traces of a pillar and hence eliminate all pillar memory, which reduces the risk of rebirth of a harmful system.

Cultural displacement can be a tool that promotes critical reinterpretation of historical events by using educational institutions and public discourse. Societies can replace religious symbols, such as holidays and rituals that glorify outdated or harmful systems, while also providing inclusive alternatives. Mental reconditioning can be implemented through schooling (introducing new moral values via curricula), literature, media, and community narratives. Encouraging public acknowledgement and healing can also lead to significant progress in acceptance and the letting go of entrenched social structures.

We can further target the media (cultural and mental pillars) and economic pillars by deplatforming and defunding institutions or companies that influence or benefit from old systems (e.g., nepotism, misogyny, etc.). Similarly, incentivising inclusive growth platforms and promoting them will help the public reject exploitative systems and normalise diversity and equitable development.

To sustain pillars, we must reinforce the triad. Culturally sound prosocial norms that are visible in media and traditions must be established and prioritised. The values of the system must be embedded within the mentality by promoting psychological ownership and emotional connection to the systems or values we are trying to uphold. Through the economy, we can create reward structures and laws that sustain positive systems, not by default but through intentional reinforcement of the pillars.

Note that these strategies are to be treated as examples. In practice, the context of each social system must be carefully studied before employing any tactic to avoid antagonistic effects. The real challenge lies in maintaining the balance between the deconstruction

of the past and the construction of the future. Pillar memory is as much a threat as it is an opportunity. It can revive oppressive systems but also preserve progressive values when intentionally cultivated.

Without continuous efforts of reinforcement or breakdown, we risk leaving the system in a loose, hanging phase and hence risk hibernation (which may lead to later rebirth of harmful systems or complete loss of beneficial ones). Such is the dual goal of SRT. The true priority is building a stable and well-organized society by snuffing out potentially harmful pillar memory and sustaining the memory of collective moral victories.

Conclusion

Systemic Rejection Theory (SRT) offers a unique approach for solving the gap in understanding of systemic collapse. The triadic model of SRT illustrates how harmful systems collapse when one of their pillars is treated with active rejection with collective intent. The pillars are mental, cultural, and economic. SRT suggests that rejection and intent are the primary forces of systemic disintegration and that the pillars follow triadic interdependence; hence, when one is damaged or reinforced, other pillars reflect the same effect. Case studies of numerous historical events and works of several scholars demonstrate the dichotomy of the phenomena when a system is seen to collapse into the imaginary realm: a system may die or hibernate under the influence of rejection. In death, all the pillars are observed to have fallen with almost no hope of rebirth. However, more often, a system is seen to have lingering traces of one or more foundational factors—pillar memory; this leaves a risk of harmful social structures jumping back to the reality realm and, on the other hand, a chance of reemergence of beneficial systems, cultures, and values. SRT also warns about the risk of leaving an oppressive system in a mutating or hibernating state and the stakes involved in passive tolerance versus the certain death provided through active rejection. Again, SRT is not without its limitations. In lived reality, systems resist general classifications of rupture and persistence; they rather show various local complexities, adaptation, and an overall nonlinear process. Ultimately, these challenges, rather than undermining SRT, refine it. A more dynamic application of the theory will accommodate hybrid outcomes and develop further practical effectiveness. SRT empowers both scholars and activists by providing a clear framework of systemic collapse, posing it not as spontaneous changes or inevitability but as an intentional choice. A society can withdraw its belief, resources, and legitimacy from a system to initiate and lead its fall. The same mechanisms of acceptance may be directed at systems worth preserving. In both directions, rejection is not merely a response; it is an active force of evolution in a society, a force of transformation.

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