

## Differential Harm: Patterns of Uneven Destruction

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Received: 24 May 2023; Published: 4 July 2023

### Abstract

This essay opposes the idea that contemporary critical events like pandemics, global warming, environmental deterioration, et cetera, are to be considered as affecting humanity in a uniform way. Instead of seeing these phenomena like abstract universal threats, I propose to look at them through the lens of my concept of *differential harm*. By drawing on interdisciplinary sources, this concept aims at covering a series of processes that are best described in differential, rather than absolute, terms. By the same token, differential harm is a matter of scale. Moreover, this essay also suggests that macroscopic critical processes are better understood as instances of *harm*, rather than *violence*. Instead of framing macroscopic disruptive phenomena as simple calamities or crises, my approach also aims at acknowledging their social, political, and psychological dimensions.

### Keywords

differential harm, climate change, pandemics, power, system

### Introduction

An action, or set of actions, constitutes a form of *differential harm* if (1) it implies that some groups or categories will be affected more than others, (2) it does not manifest as direct personal violence (even though it can lead to one), (3) it is the effect of a synergy of causes and/or actions, and (4) it is exploitable by some groups to gain or maintain some form of advantage (power, wealth, etc.) over others.

*Differential harm* has to be distinguished from absolute harm. I will explain this difference through the use of an imaginary scenario. Let us take a group of entities or subjects. It does not matter the nature of the group, as it can be a group composed of different individuals, communities, nations, and so on. What is important is its formal characterisation as a group. Let us now simulate inflicting a damaging event upon the group as a whole. For example, a sudden scarcity of resources, a pandemic, or a worsening of the environmental conditions. Of course, such an event will have negative effects on each and every member of the group, since it is, by definition, inflicted upon the group as a whole. In other words, the conditions will worsen for everyone. However, it is also true that those who were doing slightly better than the average before the event, will see their condition improved relative to the others. The result is that while the group is, as a whole, in worse conditions, some of its entities are now doing better if compared to the other members of the group. Put it differently, everybody loses, but those able to better endure the event will improve their condition if

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HARM, Volume 2 (2023), 1–10  
DOI: 10.46586/harm.2023.11024  
Journal of HARM ISSN: 2940-3073  
<https://ojs.ub.rub.de/index.php/HARM>



### Recommended Citation:

Di Liberto, Y. (2023). Differential harm: Patterns of uneven destruction. *HARM*, 2, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.46586/harm.2023.11024>

compared to the average. While this is often true for economic crises (Bichler & Nitzan, 2015, p. 89), in the time of cataclysmic and all-encompassing events, such as climate change or the risks related to global pandemics, these patterns of differential harm have to be considered of central importance. Of course, in the long run, the worsening of the general conditions stops being differential and becomes absolute, for the possibility of a global collapse makes the relative or differential imbalances between the elements of the system less and less relevant. But during the time before that point is eventually reached, what should be considered is differential, rather than absolute harm.

Instead, present phenomena like climate change, pandemics and pollution, are often spoken of as calamities that affect Humanity with a capital “H”, meaning humanity as a whole, as a category, a species, so to speak. By characterising them as such, one implies that (1) they belong to *nature* (calamity) rather than being caused or facilitated by human activities, and that (2) they affect more or less *all* of us (humanity) rather than some of us more than others. Both of these implications are not compatible with the destructive processes just mentioned; first, because in all of them, there is often a direct human cause (or a facilitation) and, second, because the consequences of these macroscopic destructive processes are not equally distributed on the social field.

As pinpointed by Shimshon Bichler and Jonathan Nitzan (2018), things like “water problems, peak energy, massive population movements, genetic engineering, species extinction” (p. 30) and other environmental transformations, have “harmful consequences [that] are not necessarily harmful to *everyone*, and certainly not to the *same extent*” (p. 30–31).

Moreover, in some cases, they might even increase the advantage (in terms of wealth, power, safety, etc.) of some groups or categories of people to the detriment of others, as this uneven or differential distribution of harm “can be capitalised in ways that empower some while disempowering all others” (Bichler & Nitzan, 2018, p. 31). In the face of present macroscopic calamities, the “capitalization of tragedies and catastrophes of all kinds” (Virilio, 2007, p. 12) can become ubiquitous.

In this regard, some structural properties of these natural processes are common to other more *human-made* crises like inflation, resource depletion, and so on. For example, they may act as a *redistributive* process; for instance, a period of high prices makes it so that the wealthier can temporarily accumulate more relative to others, hence strengthening their position further. This means that, independently of the natural/human distinction, a macroscopic critical phenomenon, almost always, acts in reshaping the social field towards asymmetry (Di Liberto, 2022); unless, of course, active measures are taken, a feature that Johan Galtung (1969) pinpoints when he speaks of an aggravation pattern that is virtually embedded in every social system (p. 177).

Of course, events such as anthropogenic climate change, pandemics, pollution, et cetera, are not the same as there are evident differences between them, and even more blatant differences are easy to see when we compare events such as inflation (man-made) against the Covid-19 pandemic (natural). However, what should be emphasised here is their structural and dynamic commonalities, rather than their differences. Borrowing from Bichler and Nitzan, I propose the consideration of all these different phenomena as instances of *differential harm*.

### **From Structural and Slow Violence to *Differential Harm***

In order to describe this concept, it is useful to draw from (at least) two conceptual sources that constitute its methodological precursors, namely one of slow violence and one of structural violence. According to Rob Nixon (2011), slow violence “occurs gradually and out of sight, [it is] a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (p. 2). This definition already contains two important elements: (1) slow violence is hard to see and (2) its destructive effects are dispersed in time and space or, in other words, temporally and spatially delayed. As pinpointed by Thom Davies (2022), in the case of the slow violence of polluted environments, the characteristic of being invisible should not be stressed too much, as the slowness of processes of pollution are very well visible to the communities that inhabit these very toxic geographies in terms of what they experience in their own bodies, within the household, and so on (p. 420). Rather, the invisible character of slow violence should be intended to mean that it is less representationally focused on the *visual* (and more, for example, on the visceral/corporeal) and that it is tightly linked with epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), as the informal knowledge of its victims is often overlooked (Davies, 2022, p. 421).

If it is true that “violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility” (Nixon, 2011, p. 2), then slow violence partially escapes this regime of immediate visibility due to

its sibylline and silent nature, although it can be just as harmful as violence tout court. For this reason, Galtung's earlier definition of structural violence sheds some light on other key features of slow violence.

According to Galtung, "violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realisations are below their potential realisations" (Galtung, 1969, p. 168). This operative definition of violence simply states that violence is what creates a *distance* between the actual state and the potential state of one's own body or mind. For example, if somebody injured one of my legs, I would immediately experience a distance between the potential body state in which I have no pain and I am able to walk, and the state I am currently in, when I am in pain and I cannot walk. This minimal definition of violence can be applied, therefore, to other less visible or personal forms of violence. For example, if I were to deny, to a given group of people (for e.g., women), through means such as persuasion or economic deprivation, the access to education, the result would be, once again, that of a distance between their actual condition and a potential realisation/state. In this case, this state or realisation would be that of mental and cultural maturity and development.

For this reason, Galtung pinpoints, if "somatic incapacitation [...] were all violence is about, then too little is rejected when peace is held up as an ideal" (Galtung, 1969, p. 168), for "highly unacceptable social orders would still be compatible with peace" (Galtung, 1969, p. 168). For example, a social order in which all women are excluded from higher education, would be equally structurally violent as one dominated by direct physical violence, although there are no visual traces of personal qua direct violence.

This leads us to a crucial question, namely that of the relationship between structural and direct violence. In fact, there are at least two main approaches to delineate the relation between the two. On the one hand, there's what we can call the *exclusionary* thesis: the presence of structural violence *excludes* the need for personal violence, and vice versa. According to this view, structural violence is a means which allows a social system *not* to recur to direct or physical violence. The fact that one group, in a given social system, can exercise power over another in a structural way, rather than personal and violent way, is what makes direct qua physical violence unnecessary. While this can be said to be true in some cases, it cannot be generalised, as it does not constitute a universal principle. Indeed, the other way to conceive of the relationship between structural and personal violence implies seeing one included in the other. Borrowing from Galtung (1969, p. 180), who suggests using the appropriate term *latent*, I propose to call this characteristic *latent embeddedness*.

An example of the latent embeddedness of personal *within* structural violence has occurred recently during the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, during the period of forced lockdowns, the number of phone calls made by women to domestic violence helplines increased significantly as it was impossible for them to leave the household (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020). When they were asked, "why don't you just leave?" (Kern, 2022, p. 109), the most frequent reply was, "and where am I supposed to go?" (Kern, 2022, p. 109). Economic dependency and unequal income in comparison to their partners — already a structural form of violence — created the preconditions for the subsequent direct violence which erupted during the lockdowns. Personal violence was not simply absent, as the exclusionary thesis would suggest. It was rather latently embedded within the structural violence of economic dependency, only to appear and manifest itself when the right conditions occurred. Structural violence is not just the alternative to direct violence. Rather, the first (structural violence) holds the second (direct violence) in a state of virtuality. As a whole, the two constitutes a form of asymmetric equilibrium fraught with potential releases of localised violence. This example also sheds light on another feature mentioned above, namely that of a temporal delay of the effects in respect to the causes.

This feature becomes even more apparent in the case of economic decisions. In a 2021 study, two researchers from the University of Economics in Madrid and the University of Economics in Barcelona made a study on the relationship between of employment policies based on short term contracts and suicide rates (Jiménez & Castelló, 2021). The suicide mortality rate of the affected categories of people, that is, those "entering the labour market just after liberalisation", rose by at least 25.3% (Jiménez & Castelló, 2021, p. 13). Moreover, the use of drugs also rose significantly within the same cohorts analysed. High school first level graduates were more affected by employment policies which promoted precarious contracts, suggesting once again that structural and institutional decisions harm people in a differential way. What is also important to stress here is the temporal dimension: the institutional decision, that is, the promotion of liberal

short-term types of contracts, sees delayed manifestations of its effects. What holds for the cases of domestic violence during lockdowns, holds in an analogous way, in this case; the singular event (the suicide, the use of drug, the physical violence by the partner) has to be acknowledged not merely as a manifestation of a singular psychological phenomenon *per se*, but rather, as belonging to a broader process which creates the conditions for these particular outcomes to emerge. The punctuated series of events has to be acknowledged as another way of seeing the continuous. In other words, one can see the whole harmful process from two complementary points of view: from above as a big wave unfolding in time, or from below as the teeming of the singular events composing it. In other words, the two views should be considered together as part of an emergent process in which neither “everything comes from the bottom”, nor “everything comes from the top” (Bunge, 2003, p. 40).

Indeed, as underlined by Chakkarath and Gudehus (2023), humans can be harmed directly, and also indirectly “through the manipulation of their natural and social environment” (p. 2); for example, through the destruction of “bonds, homes, sacred places, food sources” (p. 2) or through institutional action, as in the case of an unequal access to education and knowledge sanctioned by law or rules, be them religious or not. This consideration, along with the fact that prolonged vulnerability, in itself already damaging, suggests that these acts should be categorised as *harm*. The concept of harm further encompasses the less directly damaging processes, which do not necessarily fit the standard category of violence, but acts that are real nonetheless.

### **Thinking Through Metaphors: Harmful Systems as Chains, Oceans, and Webs**

In order to understand the relationship between the manifest outcomes and their underlying structural preconditions, we can use the metaphor of the chain. Let us imagine holding a chain from its extremities with one hand holding on to each end of the chain, and starting to pull it from both ends. If we keep applying this force for enough time, the chain will eventually break. We know it will. Of course, during the course of pulling, we do not know exactly at *which* point it will break; we will only know where the weakest link is by continuously pulling it until it breaks. We can think of the continuous pulling force as analogous in structural and chronic dimensions of violence, and the sudden breaking at a particular point (or points) as the local and abrupt manifestation of violence or damage.

The idea of differential harm encapsulates both the slowness and the structural aspect, but it also comprises of differentiality. This, in turn, implies that differential harm is a matter of vulnerability; a system which renders some people or groups chronically and virtually more vulnerable than others is a paradigmatic instance of differential harm.

This uneven and differential harmfulness was particularly vivid, for example, during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the United States, in the period between middle March to August 2020, 50 million people lost their jobs, around 100 million risked being evicted, and the number of sub-employed rose significantly (Bina, 2020, p. 571). Also, during the pandemic, many young people between 18 and 24 applied for food assistance and one out of three within the same age bracket lost their jobs. In addition, the situation worsened for this group, especially in terms of housing and accommodation, because many of them were forced to return to their parents’ home (see the report by FEANTSA, 2021, p. 34).

Cases like these show that differential harm is an interactive process, for it is always the result of one type of vulnerability interacting with another. The pre-existing differential plane of economic vulnerability and precariousness is then met by a macroscopic event like a pandemic, which, in itself, is already a matter of human vulnerability.

The “differential morbidity” (Galtung, 1969, p. 177) that results from such cases is also scalable as it can be applied to different individuals within the same area, between different areas in the same nation, and between nations themselves (Woon, 2014), “in a chain of interlocking feudal relationships” (Galtung, 1969, p. 177). In the case of environmental pollution, this scalability of harm can have, as pointed by different authors, also racist connotations (Bullard, 1990; Walker, 2012) because minorities or low-income communities are often considered more expendable than others (Pulido, 2017; Davies, 2018; Davies & Mah, 2019).

Since adverse and macroscopic calamities cannot always be fully foretold, and neither can they be completely excluded from happening, the fact that a given portion of society would be eventually more vulnerable (in cases when the calamities happen), already constitutes, in itself, a form of differential harm.

Temporal delay of the effects, latent embeddedness, and differentiability are characteristics that push us into thinking about differential harm in a systemic way. In other words, in order to understand differential harm, one has to look at the bigger picture both in terms of time span and in terms of spatiality. How can we make sense of an institutional decision that, twenty years later after the decision was made, will increase suicide rates among the people to whom that decision applies? Or, why should we not think of pollution as a form of harm damaging physical health slowly? Is chronic harm not just as damaging as its direct counterpart? If so, then, why should it not be considered as important as the other?

Certainly, cases of differential harm as long-lasting phenomena can be described by borrowing from Louis Althusser's concept of "processes without subject" (Althusser, 2017, p. 52), as they appear to be a manifestation of the sickness of a system as a *whole*, rather than the intention of a singular individual.

In this regard, the ocean can be used as another metaphor. If one sees violence "as an interruption from normality [...] which has as main characteristic to be non-violent" (Dill-Riaz & Chakkarath, 2023, p. 32), then the metaphor of the ocean implies that normal life can be viewed as the quiet and placid ocean, while the waves which occur from time to time as the sudden peaks of violence. In this view, normality equates with peace, while violence with non-peace, and the two seem to be more or less immediately and intuitively distinguishable. However, the examples of harm mentioned above in the previous section clearly show that this can be a misleading metaphor and that we can use it only with a proviso, for if we compare life with an ocean, "we should not lose sight of the fact that it is part of the normality of life to have to live under conditions that are always threatening" (Dill-Riaz & Chakkarath, 2023, p. 32). In other words, what appears as placid and as absence of violence, may reveal to be not so if seen from a closer perspective. In short, it is a matter of zooming *in* and *out*: if you zoom *in* on the parts of the ocean that appear flat, you will see that they are composed of a texture of smaller waves. An imaginary and smaller living being would perceive those smaller waves as much more relevant (and perilous) than us. Hence, what appears as a strict dichotomy (peaceful normality versus sudden violence) is, in reality, much different; the supposed normality is just a matter of scalar perception. Thus, *harm is a matter of scale*; and a harmful system can exert its damaging power even though it appears violent to us only during its *big waves*, so to speak. The possibility of zooming in and out means that the different scales delimitate incommensurable and discontinuous zones. As a result, "what is self-evident or rational at one scale may well be destructive or unjust at another" (Clark, 2012, p. 150).

The metaphors of the chain and of the ocean help us in visualising some key aspects of systems that are, already in themselves, differentially harmful. Another final metaphor that we can utilise is that of the net of Indra in the Buddhist tradition, as found in the Avatamsaka Sutra. The idea of a net of beings, often portrayed as a spider web, summarises the Buddhist philosophical principle of an interconnectedness of reality. In particular, the net of Indra consists of an infinitely expanded texture of jewels, each of which can reflect the light of the others. This mutual co-reflection of the whole within the part summarises the idea of mutual identity and inter-causality, a theme which is key to understanding the relationship between ecology and human forms of life (Allendorf & Byers, 1998).

Alternatively, we can picture this as a spider web — the moment a point is touched, the vibration travels via the different nodes through the whole web, so that it finally reaches the spider, who becomes aware.

In analogous fashion, differential harm is a matter of systemic and interconnected harmfulness: a single decision or deed propagates through the whole and, in synergy with other decisions or deeds, can constitute a general harmful outcome. The principle of interconnectedness holds even more in a capitalist reality in which production, jobs, and wellbeing must be considered more and more as a "*resonating totality*" (Bichler & Nitzan, 2015, p. 209), a totality which can be rendered dissonant when big political and economic actors impose their disruptive decisions for the sake of profit.

For Gottfried Leibniz (2017), "everything is connected because of the fullness of the world" (p. 39), and hence, for him "every body acts upon all the others and is, in turn, subjected to their reactions, in a major or lesser extent depending on the distance" (Leibniz, 2017, p. 39). This holds in particular in the case of differential harm, for even if we can deploy Althusser's concept of "processes without subjects" (Althusser, 2017, p. 52), we should also be aware that these processes are not without *responsible* agents. In other words, although the agency of differential harm may

appear impersonal, upon a closer look, it reveals to be the product of a synergy of temporally and spatially distributed actions and decisions, made by either actual (corporeal) people or institutions.

The idea of conceiving space as quintessentially relational was recently revived by the philosophical paradigm of New Materialism (DeLanda, 2006; DeLanda, 2002; Bennett, 2010; Fox & Aldred, 2017). Just like in Indra's net or the full space of Leibnizian ontology, New Materialism and contemporary ontologies share the plea for acknowledging non-human beings and inanimate objects (Bennett, 2010) as part of a broader ecology of things. In this view, agencies and interactions are distributed across different types of beings, both animate and inanimate. What is important to underline is that these relational approaches try to evade the trap of representing space merely as an empty and passive container. Indeed, since every entity is an interacting node of inputs and outputs immersed in a wider net of entities, Levi Bryant (2014) proposes to speak of the world as composed of object/machines (in a broader sense) capable of inputs and outputs. This means, of course, that space (and time) cannot be conceived as an empty Newtonian box, a box only secondarily populated by the things we put inside of it. Instead, borrowing from Bryant (2014), we have to consider space not as "an empty field", but rather as "a field populated by machines of all sorts" (p. 143). And, since "these machines encounter one another" they also encounter "resistances, torsions, densities, and so on" (Bryant, 2014, p. 143). In other words, the idea of space as resonating totality (Bichler & Nitzan, 2015, p. 209), as machinic assemblage, or as interconnected fullness (à la Leibniz), implies a topological conception of causation in which actions, decisions, and events modify (also at a distance) and simultaneously create the world in which they take place.

But then, if the space of things is intrinsically relational and topological, and if every action travels in space and time, it means that actual people or institutional decisions have the power to act upon these resonating totalities. For example, in 2008, it was the unbridled financial speculation on food prices which acted as the final straw for the unprecedented rise in the number of migrants (Lagi et al., 2011; Wahl, 2009; Russell, 2022, p. 27). A change in the immaterial space of value (finance, backed up by legislation, or the lack thereof) acted upon the material space of people by producing differential harm and dissonance. Beyond certain thresholds, Lagi et al. (2011) calculated that the price of commodities catalyses social unrest and waves of migration. The full and interconnected space of things unceasingly interacts with the space of decisions and values. Or, in other words, the space of value and the space of matter are continuously mapped into each other. However, this co-mapping is not necessarily that of standard Marxist production: the co-mapping between things and immaterial decisions, as well as matter and value, means that their relation can also be differential and negative rather than just accretive and positive. What New Materialism and similar positions seem to get wrong is the idea that material flows and processes-without-subjects can be fully seen as impersonal entities in which human intentionality plays little or no role. Instead, the idea of differential harm implies that thinking in terms of material processes does not preclude us from investigating the nodes and loci of responsibility which actively shapes these very same processes.

### **The Threat is already Harmful: Differential Harm and Attrition**

Through the metaphor of the ocean, in particular, we see that differential harm is typically more attritional than direct violence. In other words, it explicitly comprises of the idea that the *threat* of future calamities, destructions, and so on, constitutes an already harmful condition.

Climate change is a particularly interesting case study in this regard, for it encompasses all of the features of differential harm and, moreover, it also shows the characteristic of being attritional in a literal way. In fact, the lurking threats potentially represented by it can be the cause of a general state of anxiety which, in turn, can be attritionally harmful to the human mind and body in and of itself (Hamilton, 2019; Head, 2016; Weintrobe, 2013; Weintrobe, 2020).

In a recent global survey on climate anxiety, it was found that 59% respondents across all countries were "very or extremely worried" (Hickman et al., 2021, p. e863), and 84% at least moderately worried (Hickman et al., 2021, p. e863). In particular, the survey shows more than 50% reported the following emotional states: sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless, and guilty. What is important to underline is that "more than 45% of respondents said their feelings about climate change negatively affected their daily life and functioning" (Hickman et al., 2021, p. e863) and 75% of the respondents also considered the future as "frightening" (Hickman et al., 2021, p. e863).

Contrary to the myth that people are simply apathetic about climate change (Lertzman, 2013), the threat of a potential worsening of climate conditions is a source of concern and anxiety

for the vast majority of the population. As underlined by the Climate Psychology Alliance, “prolonged and continuous climate-related anxiety affects the nervous system so that it may no longer easily regulate stress and rest responses, and it becomes unable to switch appropriately between the two” (Climate Psychology Alliance, 2022, p. 45).

Furthermore, chronic climate-anxiety can also “disrupt normal patterns of sleep and rest, leading to a continuous state of hyper-arousal” (Climate Psychology Alliance, 2022, p. 45). If, from the point of view of a vulnerable person, normality is teeming with virtual threats, normality itself becomes harmful, and the different distribution of anxiety across society should also be considered differential harm. In other words, a system can be *normally* harmful by maintaining people in a chronic and slower “state of injury” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 21).

It is not that hard to imagine how this general state of anxiety can be further capitalised. As noted by Nitzan & Bichler (2009), we are already bombarded daily, through official news reels, with messages of “uncertainty, loneliness, violence and disaster” (p. 160). And, concomitantly, we are also bombarded with the promise of easy soothing solutions in the form of personal security, pharmaceutical state-of-the-art pills, forms of insurance, safety devices, and so on. For some, fear and anxiety, in short, can become sources of profit. All this is part of that broader epochal change which Ulrich Beck famously characterised as based on risk (Beck, 1986; Beck, 2020). It is this chronic uncertainty which dominates life and that, according to Beck, becomes part of a widespread “economy of anxiety” which profits from exhaustion and nervous breakdowns (Beck, 2020, p. 28).

### **By Way of Conclusion: Is Differential Harm Intentional?**

The state of violence in the so-called Anthropocene often seems to defy personal attribution of responsibility to specific perpetrators and institutions, making violence appear as the result of a multitude of causes and agencies that act as cumulative and reinforcing loops (Krasmann, 2022).

But this seems to hold also for other types of systemic harming, like the one mentioned above on the relation between precarious job contracts and suicide rates. Are the policymakers who designed and passed the laws that made jobs more precarious to be held responsible for the wave of suicides manifesting 20 or so years later? According to the concept of differential harm, this possibility cannot be excluded.

Even the “thermal violence” (Starosielski, 2018, p. 3) of climate change is not just a neutral natural phenomenon, since it “differentially affects bodies according to their social position” (Starosielski, 2018, p. 3). Moreover, in the case of exposure to extreme heatwaves, there is often an explicit climate deterministic component that justifies the racist element. For example, in her study on the use of sweatboxes as an instrument of punishment of the slaves in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth century, Nicole Starosielski pinpoints how these forms of thermal violence were also justified by the popular claim that Black bodies simply endure it better (Starosielski, 2018, p. 10). And similar forms of climate determinism could be used to justify present and upcoming differential effects of climate warming.

Just like in the previously mentioned Indra’s net (or spiderweb) metaphor, one should speak of a coordinated or synergistic network of responsibilities, rather than an absence of human responsibility tout court.

In some cases, the direct responsibility is hidden in plain sight. For example, a memo appeared in 1992 on *The New York Times* when the then President of the World Bank, Lawrence Summers, revealed that he explicitly suggested exporting polluting industries to Africa. His own words were: “Just between you and me, shouldn’t the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the Least Developed Countries?” (quoted in Nixon, 2011, p. 1).

And if we do not limit ourselves to just scratching the surface and instead, dig a little deeper, we can find directly responsible actors in most differential harming processes.

For example, it has now become public information that big petrochemical polluters have known, since the 1970s, that the consequences of their actions would have resulted in the harming of particular areas of the world, with potential catastrophic consequences for a big portion of the population (Supran et al., 2023). In a 1981 memo, Roger Cohen, then manager at Exxon, considered it “distinctly possible” that climate warming “will indeed be catastrophic (at least for a substantial fraction of earth’s population)” (quoted in Banerjee et al., 2015, section of September 22, 2015).

In short, we can distinguish between three levels of responsibility. The first level is that of *facilitation*. For example, in her exploration of the psychological roots of the climate crisis, Sally Weintrobe (2021) shows how the general neoliberal consensus and culture of uncare facilitated the

climate crisis. The second level of responsibility is that of single decisions made by particular individuals, as in the historical examples just reported. The third and perhaps most important level of responsibility, which is typical of differential harm, has to do instead with the will or capacity, by some, to profit from the misfortunes of others. In this case, what at first looks like coincidence, can be used to gain some form of advantage later on, either to maintain one's own power/position to the detriment of others, or to keep others in a state of dependency. In cases like these, differential harm is, rather *passively* maintained than actively caused. The will not to change the harmful state has to do with an *a posteriori* usefulness that some actors can derive from it.

Given these three levels, the question of whether differential harm is a matter of intention or not can be decided only by looking at specific cases. What is valid, in general, in the case of differential harm, are the structural features outlined in our previous argumentations, namely those of causal delay, latent embeddedness, differentiability, and the synergistic effects of two or more vulnerabilities.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Fiza Lee-Winter for her editing work; her precious assistance and guidance throughout the editing process were irreplaceable. I would also like to express deep thanks Professors Pradeep Chakkarath and Christian Gudehus, senior editors and founders of the HARM Journal, for making this possible.

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