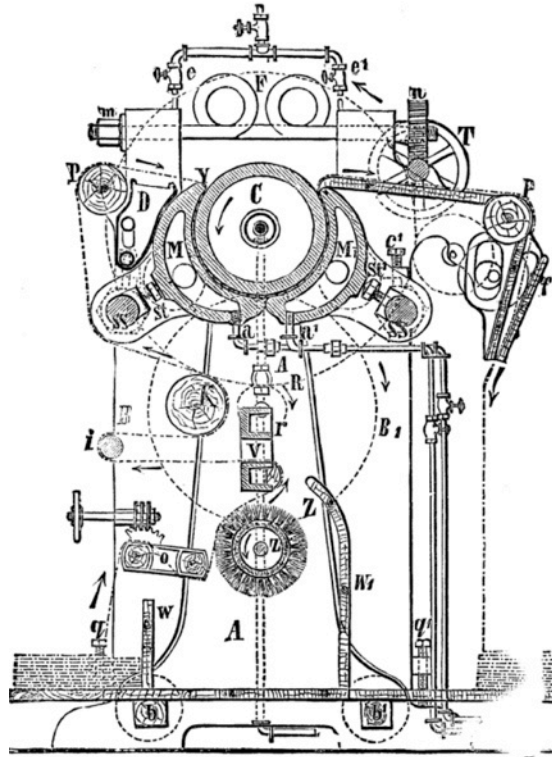


Understanding Structural Violence and Sin: The Machine



“We have forgotten the difference between a theology that supports the policies and **institutional structures of oppression** and a theology that, in response to history and human affairs, stands boldly with the widow, the orphan, the poor and the dispossessed.”

“We confess that we are complicit with **evil** when, whether tacitly or actively, we support the continuation of **structural violence** in its many forms.” ~ Kairos USA

These two passages point to a particular understanding of how oppression and violence works. As Christians, we can talk about this in terms of “evil” and “sin.”

Normally, when we talk about “sin” we talk about specific actions that individual people do, that tend to affect others in direct ways. But, the collective behavior of groups, institutions, churches, and nation states can cause harm in direct and indirect ways. This is the accumulated effect of actions that include: 1) intentionally causing harm or seeking to exploit harm for benefit, 2) inactions by people who are in a position to avoid, eliminate or limit harm but fail to do so out of laziness, fear, indifference or a sense of it being “too complicated” or “impossible” to make real change, 3) those actions or inactions caused by people who are ignorant of the larger impact of the systems in which they participate. We can give this the name “structural sin,” because the harm comes from the systems or institutions themselves, rather than any particular individuals we can place all the blame on.

Structural violence is therefore like a machine. Each individual is a gear, cog, or lever that keeps the machine going. No one piece of the machine is solely responsible, yet by continuing to keep the machine running, each piece is responsible. By our actions and inactions, by our participations in institutions (“machines”) such as the Church, the United States, the Market, our workplaces, our schools, etc., we are contributing to the running of a variety of machines. Some do harm on our behalf, whether we realize it or support it. In what ways do the institutions that US Christians participate in do harm in Israel–Palestine? Are there ways that we can throw a wrench in these machines?