

Institutions vs the Individual

The following is an excerpt from the talk I gave at the FMC forum hour on January 14 on “Engaging Racism” in remembrance of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. You can read the full text of the talk [here](#). The focus of the talk is institutional racism. This section addresses the different roles for the individual and the institution.

To begin with, we need to get a handle on the difference between an institution and an individual and how an institution can be evil, but an individual not. Notice, in doing this we are already challenging the systems worldview that seeks to blur the distinction. The best way to see the difference is with a story—a good story—like the *Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, for example. Wink¹ quotes this passage.

The owners of the land came onto the land, or more often a spokesman for the owners came.... Some of the owner men were kind because they hated what they had to do, and some of them were angry because they hated to be cruel, and some of them were cold because they had long ago found that one could not be an owner unless one were cold. And all of them were caught in something larger than themselves.... If a bank or a finance company owned the land, the owner man said, the Bank—or the Company—needs—wants—insists—must have—as though the Bank or Company were a monster, with thought and feeling, which had ensnared them. These last would take no responsibility for the banks or the companies because they were men and slaves, while the banks were machines and masters all at the same time.... The owner men sat in the cars and explained. You know the land is poor. You’ve scabbled at it long enough, God knows.

The squatting tenant men nodded and wondered and drew figures in the dust, and yes, they knew, God knows. If the dust only wouldn’t fly. If the top would only stay on the soil, it might not be so bad....

Well, it’s too late. And the owner men explained the workings and the thinkings of the monster that was stronger than they were.... You see, a bank or a company... those creatures don’t breathe air, don’t eat side-meat. They breathe profits; they eat the interest on money. If they don’t get it they die the way you die without air, without side-meat. It is a sad thing, but it is so. It is just so.... The bank—the monster has to have profits all the time. It can’t wait. It’ll die. No, taxes go on. When the monster stops growing, it dies. It can’t stay one size.

We have to do it. We don’t like to do it. But the monster’s sick. Something’s happened to the monster.

Sure, cried the tenant men, but it’s our land. We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it’s no good, it’s still ours.

We’re sorry. It’s not us. It’s the monster. The bank isn’t like a man.

¹ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and resistance in a World of Domination*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1992

Yes, but the bank is only made up of men.

No, you're wrong there—quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it.

Steinbeck's "monster" is what Wink calls the Principalities and Powers. These are not a modern day creation. Wink estimates that they have been around since the Babylonians five thousand years ago.

To complete the analogy, we can interpret this passage to suggest that all of us here could be anti-racists, and still be complicit with the institution of racism, a system that can force us to do violence to others.