

Book Review

Justice and the politics of difference

Iris Marion Young
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The first edition of this book was published in 1990. This is the 2011 edition with a new foreword by Danielle Allen. The author, Iris Marion Young, died in 2006 aged 57 years. From 2000 to 2006, Iris Young was Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago. She was an American political theorist and socialist feminist. Allen writes: ‘... Young engaged social ontology, epistemology, social psychology, feminist theory, critical theory, and discourse theory as well as political philosophy in what is still a dazzling display’ (p.ix). My interest in this book stretches back to 2004 when I was introduced to her work. My copy of her 1990 edition has a well-worn cover, penciled notes in some margins, and sticky-note tags: the vestiges of regular use.

The focus of Iris Young’s research and writing over the years was on social difference, justice, and inequality beyond the distribution of material goods to one that sought to explicate the invidious interplay

of the social, the personal, and the political, and conceptions of domination and oppression. Reflecting on the twenty-first century, contemporary societies, and disruptive events, some of Iris Young's arguments present an idealized or visionary, or perhaps a hopeful, notion of individuals, institutions, and an egalitarian society. She admits to making assumptions that others might not agree with. For example equality for all is a 'moral value'; 'deep [societal] injustices' require 'institutional changes'; 'structures of domination wrongfully pervade our society' (p.14). A particular feature of her work centres on five forms of oppression – exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence – that stand the test of time.

The book comprises eight chapters. The Introduction gives the reader clear insights into Iris Young's conception of political philosophy and notions of justice. Her definition of politics comprises 'institutional organization, public action, social practices and habits, and cultural meanings insofar as they are potentially subject to collective evaluation and decisionmaking' (p.9). Feminism and her commitment to and participation in social movements are central to Iris Young's work in this field. Her involvement in social groups provided the impetus and the lens through which to rethink and rework the concepts of difference, oppression, and (in)justice.

The first chapter establishes the premise of Iris Young's argument and work in this field, providing a compelling critique of the distributive paradigm with reference to Rawl's (1971) distribution of "rights and duties" (p.25), for instance, and questioning what it means to distribute a right. She argues the inherent (in)justices of institutional contexts and structures responsible for distributing material resources, power, income, and wealth, are often taken for granted and not evaluated. Iris Young draws on other theorists – Agnes Heller (1987), Charles Taylor (1985), and Seyla Benhabib (1986) – in defining injustice in terms of domination and oppression.

This provides the basis for chapter two and the five 'faces' of oppression. Iris Young's 'enabling conception of justice' (p.39) sees injustice in terms of domination and oppression. She begins the chapter with a critical discussion of oppression with reference to social movements and groups from the 1960s and 1970s, for instance, and proposes a structural conception of oppression. She argues it is not possible to have one

definition of oppression, given the multiple factors at play. Instead, she offers the five faces as a means of capturing the essence of oppression. The first three ‘faces’ – exploitation, marginalization, and powerlessness – reflect the institutional and structural power relations that determine people’s access to and participation in society’s social, political, economic, and cultural spheres. Cultural imperialism encompasses the impact of society’s dominant discourses and meanings that establish the norms to define who belongs or not, who is visible or invisible, who is “Other”. Iris Young quotes Du Bois’ (1969, p.45) “double consciousness” that involves “... always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (p.60). Her work with the fifth face of oppression, violence, is based not so much on ‘the particular acts [of violence], but rather ‘the social context surrounding them, which makes them possible and even acceptable’ (p.61). She describes violence as a social practice; a ‘social given that everyone knows happens and will happen again’ (p.62). Iris Young justifies her application of the five faces of oppression to groups to enable comparisons of oppressions, without essentializing them or declaring one more significant than another.

In chapter three the premise of Iris Young’s argument hinges on the nexus between democracy and social justice, and the realization of this through participation in democratic processes and consultation. She focuses on the welfare capitalist society as the social context for further critiques of the distributive paradigm and (in)justices. She argues that the ‘depoliticization of public policy development and decision making’ removed from the public domain obscures the ‘institutional rules, practices, and social relations’ that perpetuate domination and oppression and therefore inhibit the possibility of challenge and change (p.75). Reference to the welfare capitalist society reflects the era of Iris Young’s writing, but parallels can be drawn to the depoliticization and imperviousness of structures of policy and decision making in today’s neoliberal society.

Chapters four, five and six extend discussions on aspects of cultural imperialism. Iris Young argues, ‘that modern political theory and practice wrongly universalize dominant group perspectives’ (p.65). For instance, chapter four explores the ‘ideal of impartiality’ (p.96) in institutions, structures, and processes. Impartiality denies or constrains difference through the creation of universal rules and principles

that assume and treat everyone in the same way. In chapter five, Iris Young focuses on the body and identity and the ways in which the categorization of bodies according to a “normative gaze” ‘constructs some kinds of bodies as ugly, disgusting, or degenerate’ (p.11). There is much in this chapter to consider and apply to contemporary contexts with regards to ageism, sexism, racism, unconscious fears, and consciousness raising. Then chapter six explores social movements and difference including a call to alter the meaning of difference from one that denotes ‘absolute otherness’ (p.170) to an understanding of difference as ‘relational’ with a contextualized, encompassing, and inclusive notion of difference (p.171), one that recognizes and accepts group differences.

Chapters seven and eight focus on the faces of exploitation and powerlessness. Within the context of institutions, workplaces, and education. Iris Young explores assumptions that underlie notions of merit and affirmative action. Of particular note are the taken for granted hierarchical divisions of labour and associated inequities, and the interplay of competition, merit, and the measurement of performance. In the final chapter, she critiques the duality of individualism and community. She explores the notion of an ‘ideal community’ and depicts ‘an ideal city life’, one that reflects ‘a being together of strangers in openness to group difference’ (p.256). Iris Young views ideals as integral to emancipatory politics, dislodging existing assumptions of structures, institutions, and social relations and creating opportunities for critique and exploration of alternatives.

Iris Young’s theoretical and philosophical contributions to this field are far-sighted and enduring and are touchpoints for examining contemporary structures, institutions, and social relations. This book is an excellent resource for students, researchers, lecturers, and adult educators exploring conceptions of power and social relations, domination, oppression, (in)justices, social justice, and the politics of difference across numerous fields and disciplines.