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McKeown, Maeve

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SOCIAL JUSTICE

Maeve McKeown

For the last 50 years, debates about justice in political philosophy have focused on distributive justice – the distribution of resources between citizens – or, in John Rawls’s famous terminology, the distribution of “the benefits and burdens of social cooperation” (Rawls, 1971: 4). But this way of thinking about justice has its limitations. In particular, it fails to identify the many kinds of social injustice that afflict contemporary advanced capitalist societies, including (amongst other things) sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism. Looking at the social movements that have emerged over the last 50 years reveals claims about injustice relating to identity, difference, status, and unequal power relations. Take any “new left” social movement of the 1960s–1980s (the Women’s Liberation Movement, the LGBTQI+ movement, the disability rights movement, Indigenous Rights movements, etc.), or some of the most prominent movements today, such as Black Lives Matter, movements for decolonization, or trans rights, and you will see that these groups have broader demands that are not captured by the idea of distributive justice.

These social movements demand *recognition* of difference, they highlight the inability of members of certain social groups to be heard and taken seriously (*epistemic injustice*), they demand *relational equality*, and they have highlighted the problem of *structural injustice*. These social movements do not necessarily tell a story about what *justice* looks like, rather they identify and aim to rectify *injustice*. Philosophers have tried to systemize the ideas of these social movements, in order to support these movements’ quest for justice. In this chapter, I will look at the topics of recognition, epistemic injustice, relational egalitarianism, and structural injustice, but first, I start with the feminist critical theorist Iris Marion Young’s (1990) critique of the “distributive paradigm” of justice, which challenges John Rawls’s theory of distributive justice in a way that captures these different strands of alternative social justice theory.

1 Critique of the Distributive Paradigm

In her influential 1990 book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Iris Marion Young wrote an excoriating critique of what she called “the distributive paradigm” of justice, which continues to inspire philosophers of a more critical bent to this day. Young argued that, while redistribution of resources was certainly an important concern for justice, thinking about justice solely in terms of distributions of resources failed to account for the range of injustices in the contemporary United States.

Distributive justice theorists focus on the distribution of resources between individuals, which assumes that individuals are social atoms, rather than members of groups involved in power relationships

(Young, 1990: 18). But the “bundles of resources” (to use a phrase that is popular with distributive theorists) that individuals have are due to their membership of social groups, as women, as Black people, as disabled people, etc. Because it focuses exclusively on individuals’ resources, the distributive paradigm does not question the relationships between social groups that lead to these unequal distributions. The distributive paradigm also does not question the institutional framework that decides upon the allocation of resources – it assumes there is a centralized state bureaucracy, which parcels up the bundles and allocates them to individuals, without the individuals having a say over resource-allocation (Young, 1990: 20).¹

What’s wrong with this picture is that various issues that are intuitively considered to be issues of justice are excluded from the framework. Young (1990: 22–4) focuses on three. First, decision-making power. Who gets to decide on what the resources are and how they are distributed? And why do some agents have the power to determine the shape of others’ lives? For example, what if a large corporation decides to close its plant in a small, rural town, rendering half the population unemployed; is it *just* for a corporation to hold the livelihoods of these people in its hands? Second, the division of labor. Distributive theorists are concerned with the distribution of the top jobs that have high salaries and status. But why is there a division of labor in the first place that divides jobs along these lines, into professional and non-professional jobs; is that just? Young gives the example of feminist critiques of the division of labor. On the one hand, feminists make a distributive justice critique – why are so many of the high-salary, high-status professional jobs occupied by men? Justice demands that more women get these jobs. On the other hand, feminists also critique the fact that many low-salary, low-status jobs are associated with women, such as caring and cleaning, and indeed jobs that earn no money whatsoever – domestic labor and childcare in the home. This is a non-distributive claim: it questions why certain roles and occupations are feminized, which leads to the third issue not addressed by distributive justice theorists – culture. The dominant social group in society is viewed as the cultural norm. Their worldview, attitudes, and tastes are perceived as normal. The worldview, attitudes, and tastes of other social groups are perceived as abnormal or deviant. This leads to two related problems: these groups are simultaneously marked by the dominant groups as “Other,” associated with various demeaning stereotypes, and they are also rendered invisible, their voices and different perspectives are ignored.

Young argues that instead of focusing on an “ideal theory” of distributive justice, the starting point for justice theory should be actually existing forms of injustice. In contemporary capitalist societies, these are domination and oppression. Domination is the “institutional constraint on self-determination,” meaning that individuals and social groups do not get to determine the conditions of their actions (Young, 1990: 37). Most people today are dominated because the conditions of their actions are determined by states, which they have minimal influence over, and by large corporations, over which they have no say. The counterpoint to domination is more democracy; increasing the power that individuals have to determine the conditions of their lives in the public-political sphere and the workplace. Oppression is “the institutional constraint on self-development,” meaning that some people are prevented from developing their talents, from learning skills, and from communicating effectively with others by institutions and social structures (Young, 1990: 37). While most people in advanced capitalist societies are dominated, not everyone is oppressed. Members of some social groups have opportunities to become members of the professional class, to develop themselves as individuals, and pursue their ambitions. Groups that do not have these opportunities are oppressed. Perhaps most famously, Young argues that oppression manifests in at least five forms (Young, 1990: Ch. 2).

First, exploitation. Some social groups expend their energies and labor power for the benefit of other social groups, undermining the oppressed group’s capacity for self-development. For instance, women expend their time and energy on domestic labor, childcare, and emotional labor, freeing up men for more creative pursuits. People of color are often trapped in “menial” labor, both in the

developing world and within advanced capitalist societies. They work in unskilled, low-paying occupations in which they lack autonomy and facilitate the work of others or serve others. Second, marginalization. Marginals are people who are excluded from the capitalist economy, including racialized people and also the old, the young who can't get first jobs, and many people with disabilities. Being marginalized is not only a distributive justice issue, the marginalized are bored, feel useless, and lack self-respect. Third, powerlessness. The powerless are the "non-professional" class who do not have the opportunity to exercise power over others, power is always exercised over them. They lack authority and status. Fourth, cultural imperialism – the culture of the dominant group is the norm and everyone else is "Othered" and silenced. Fifth, violence. Members of certain social groups are vulnerable to random acts of violence, both physical and verbal, including women, people of color, and LGBTQI+ people. Members of these groups know they could be victims of violence at any time. This violence is legitimized by society because the perpetrators almost always get away with it.

Tackling oppression might not only require redistribution of resources in some instances (e.g., exploitation, marginalization), but it also requires "cultural revolution" (Young, 1990: 152). Difference must be recognized, accommodated, and even celebrated. Ingrained ways of thinking and acting must be challenged in order to tackle unjust social relationships between groups. Everyone must be able to have a say in the public-political sphere, which requires attending to and respecting people's differences. Decision-making power, the division of labor, and culture are all sites of contemporary injustice, but they are not captured by the distributive justice framework. Redistributing resources is inadequate to tackle domination and oppression; redistribution only addresses one part of a much bigger problem.

2 Recognition

Young's analysis highlights the themes that I will discuss in the next three sections of this chapter: recognition, epistemic injustice, and relational equality. All of these topics are concerned with what can broadly be called "status inequality" – the idea that what matters for justice is the equal status, or social standing, of all individuals and social groups.

Young's analysis also represents a bridge between two different philosophical traditions – Anglo-American and continental philosophy. Where Anglo-American political philosophy tends towards questions of rights, duties, and social contract theory, continental philosophy tends towards questions of power, the self, and recognition. Recognition has been a foundational concept in continental philosophy and its roots go back to Fichte and Hegel.

Hegel famously theorized the problem of recognition through the master/slave dialectic. Briefly, the dialectic is as follows: in the beginning, the self sees itself in a mortal fight with the other. In this struggle for life or death, the self faces three options: eliminate the other, dominate the other, or let the other be (Williams, 2013: 7). In the master/slave dialectic, the master dominates the other. Both the master and slave preserve their independence, but in an unsatisfactory way: the slave becomes thing-like and servile, an instrument to serve the master's ends, whereas the master's independence is related to coercion, domination, and the threat of death at the hands of the slave. Neither is truly free; both are dependent on the other. This dialectic can be resolved when both parties recognize the other. This paves the way for mutual affirmation and reconciliation.

Philosophers working in this tradition understand justice through the lens of recognition. They argue that the self is not formed in isolation; it is formed in relation to others. Other people, and society more generally, have the capacity to misrecognize individuals and social groups, which constitutes an injustice.

Philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon discussed this problem in relation to colonialism. He describes a scenario where he, a Black man from Martinique, was walking along a street in Paris in

the 1950s when a White child pointed at him and said to her mother “Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!” (Fanon, 2008: 84). Fanon says that the child not only objectified him, but he also objectified himself. He immediately associated himself with a range of stereotypes associated with Africans in the White colonial imagination. He writes:

I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood? But I did not want this revision, this thematization. All I wanted was to be a man among other men. (Fanon, 2008: 85)

Fanon goes on to argue that this sense of being an object and being inferior to White people has been internalized by Blacks. Part of achieving equal status is not just achieving equal rights but achieving an internalized sense of equality. Black people need to see themselves as equal. And White people need to recognize them as equal. For Fanon, the battle for recognition prefigures the possibility of ethical relations between groups (Gordon, 2007: 6). If a group is seen as not fully human, then it will not be included in any kind of distributive justice or moral scheme. This group therefore must fight, including by use of violent means, to be seen as on a par with the dominant group. Politics (and violence) precedes ethics.

Charles Taylor developed a politics of recognition in the context of multicultural policymaking in Canada in the 1990s. Taylor writes:

The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (Taylor, 1994: 25)

The politics of recognition ask us to recognize the unique identity of different individuals, which depends on their membership of particular social groups. Failure to recognize the unique identities of members of minority groups amounts to assimilating everyone to the dominant group. Because the self is bound up with group identity, this leads to political questions about special protections for minority groups. It is on this basis that Taylor argues that justice requires that *group* identities ought to be preserved and given special protections. On Taylor’s view, recognition works out politically by giving certain minority groups different, collective rights, for example, First Nations Canadians should be afforded certain group rights that are not given to other Canadians (such as rights to territory or hunting, or some political autonomy), and some minority groups can exclude others or enact policies designed to preserve their cultural integrity (such as Quebec requiring immigrants to send their children to French-speaking schools).

Recent Indigenous scholarship has seen pushback on Taylor’s perspective. For example, Glen Coulthard (2014: Ch. 1) argues that Taylor’s politics of recognition fails to recognize the revolutionary anti-colonial implications of Fanon’s interpretation of the master/slave dialectic. Fanon highlighted that in the context of colonialism, the master is not dependent on recognition from the slave, and that recognition-politics in this context amounts to the colonizer bestowing rights on the colonized serving to bolster the underlying power structure. Furthermore, the colonizer merely deciding to recognize the colonized, such as the Canadian state deciding to recognize First Nations peoples, ignores the need for a (violent) struggle for recognition. It, therefore, cannot achieve the kind of psychological liberation of the colonized that Fanon envisaged. However, psychological

liberation in the colonial context doesn't have to depend on violence; Coulthard suggests, following Fanon, that the slave (the colonized) should "turn away" from the master (the colonizer) and focus instead on *self*-recognition.

In the 1990s–2000s, the politics of recognition mostly applied in theory and in practice to debates about multiculturalism and Indigenous group rights. The struggle for recognition is perhaps most visible today in the trans rights movement. As psychoanalyst Jacqueline Rose (2016) writes in her essay on the trans movement, "Whatever stage of the trans journey or form of transition, the crucial question is whether you will be recognized as the other sex... no human can survive without recognition. To survive, we all have to be seen." The trans movement's emphasis on misrecognition of gender raises new political questions to previous debates; instead of generating demands for group rights, some trans scholars and activists aim for recognition within existing group categories of sex and gender, whereas others destabilize and demand transformation of these categories (Bettcher, 2020).

However, while recognition is thought to be vital to justice within continental philosophy, there is debate about the extent to which redistribution is also needed. Is recognition alone sufficient to constitute justice, or must it be combined with redistribution of resources? Nancy Fraser (1997) argues that the politics of recognition can be in tension with the politics of redistribution. For instance, the struggle of the working class is not for recognition of difference, but for economic parity, which eliminates difference. Even though struggles for recognition and redistribution often go hand in hand, it is useful to keep them analytically distinct. On one end of the spectrum, the working class requires redistribution to overcome socioeconomic injustice like exploitation, economic marginalization, and deprivation. On the other end of the spectrum, LGBTQI+ people are struggling for recognition and overcoming cultural or symbolic injustice, like domination, disrespect, and nonrecognition. Groups enduring both forms of injustice face "the redistribution–recognition dilemma" because they both need to claim and deny group specificity. These groups include women and African Americans. Both groups face economic and cultural injustice. Achieving economic justice seems to deny difference, but achieving cultural justice seems to require affirming it.

The solution is to look for transformative, as opposed to affirmative remedies. Affirmative policies aim to correct inequalities without addressing the underlying framework that generates them in the first place. Transformative remedies aim to restructure the underlying generative framework. An affirmative redistributive policy, like the welfare state, can in fact create recognition-based injustices: the welfare state singles out the poor as requiring help which stigmatizes them and creates hostility towards them (Fraser, 1997: 25). A transformative approach to material inequality aims to change the underlying class structure by severing the link between employment and consumption through universal welfare programs, progressive taxation, full employment, public ownership, and democratic decision-making. An affirmative cultural remedy is like Taylor's proposal – special rights for certain minority groups. But a transformative remedy aims to deconstruct group identities, challenging everyone's sense of identity.

Not everyone agrees with Fraser's position. Axel Honneth provides perhaps the most systematic attempt to understand justice in terms of recognition, claiming contra-Fraser, that recognition is the fundamental problem. Honneth claims that the lack of distributive justice signals *disrespect* and the *humiliation* of those affected and that is the source of the injustice (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 125). Iris Marion Young also challenges Fraser's view, claiming that social movements for feminism, anti-racism, and LGBT liberation conceive of "cultural recognition as a means to economic and political justice" (Young, 1997: 148). But Fraser has hit back in recent years, arguing that the problem of global justice highlights that redistribution can be independent of claims for recognition. She argues further that the problem of global justice has highlighted a third vector of justice: redistribution, recognition, and *representation* (Fraser, 2010). The issue with the latter is the *frame* of justice: who is included in social justice, citizens of a nation-state or all of humankind?

3 Epistemic Injustice

Another form of injustice has received significant philosophical attention in recent years – epistemic injustice. Epistemology is the theory of knowledge, and epistemic injustice is the injustice of failing to recognize certain speakers or groups as credible sources of knowledge. This aspect of injustice taps into recognition theory and also Young’s category of cultural imperialism – the silencing of minority groups.

Despite being a relatively recent philosophical debate, claims about epistemic injustice have history, deriving from a longstanding tradition in Black feminism and postcolonial thought. The idea that subalterns cannot be heard was famously highlighted by Gayatri Spivak (1997) in her classic postcolonial text “Can the subaltern speak?” from 1985. But long before that, Sojourner Truth, a former slave who fought for emancipation, proclaimed “Ain’t I a woman?” in a 1851 speech at the Women’s Rights Convention in Ohio, illuminating the erasure of Black women’s claims and needs from the first-wave feminist fight for suffrage. This theme of the silencing and denial of the credibility of Black women threads throughout Black feminist thought, including bell hooks’ book *Ain’t I a Woman?* (1987), and Patricia Hill Collins’s argument that Black women in the US are systematically denied credibility (Collins, 2000).

Charles W. Mills identified the problem of “white ignorance” in philosophy and society (Mills, 2007). Despite innovations in Marxism and feminist standpoint theory, which emphasize that knowledge is situated and shaped by social group membership, mainstream epistemology has relentlessly understood knowledge as individualistic, and it assumes the “neutral” perspective, which is, in fact, the perspective of White, propertied men (the people who were allowed to do philosophy for most of the discipline’s history, at least in the West). But this problem is not confined to academic philosophy. As Mills highlights, W. E. B. Du Bois identified the problem of “double-consciousness” in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*, which is that Black people see themselves both from their own perspective and from the perspective of White people; they have to know the White population’s way of seeing them in order to survive (Du Bois, 2007: 8). White ignorance of other perspectives has been instrumental in serving the interests of White people. For instance, it allowed Whites to perceive lands as “empty” even though thousands of people lived there. Nowadays it enables Whites to see the world through the lens of “color blindness,” where people of color are supposedly of equal standing, but this assimilation erases the need for material and symbolic repair of past injustice; material repair meaning monetary reparations and symbolic repair being recognition of the past and continuing harms committed against African-Americans, such as an apology for slavery or the dismantling (or at least significant reform) of the police and criminal justice system. Mills adds that Black testimony has always been “whited out” (Mills, 2007: 34). For example, during slavery Blacks were not allowed to testify in court against Whites “because they were not seen as credible witnesses,” and enslaved people’s narratives in writing or in speeches had to have a White authenticator who wrote the preface or introduced them as a credible speaker (Mills, 2007: 32).

Miranda Fricker systematized these ideas in her book *Epistemic Injustice* (Fricker, 2007). She identifies two aspects of epistemic injustice. *Testimonial injustice* is the failure to hear the testimony of a particular speaker and to deny their credibility. For example, the enslaved people that Mills referred to. Kristie Dotson has added that “epistemic violence” occurs when listeners fail to communicate in a reciprocal way with a speaker based on their own pernicious ignorance (Dotson, 2011).

Another stark example of testimonial injustice and epistemic violence is the case of the Yorkshire Ripper in the UK. The Ripper, Peter Sutcliffe, was found guilty of murdering 13 women and attempting to murder 7 others between 1975 and 1980. Sutcliffe was interviewed by the police 9 times and released before he was finally caught on a minor traffic charge. The police were convinced that the killer was a hoaxer called “Wearside Jack” who sent them a tape where he confessed to the murders and spoke with a North-Eastern English accent. But many women who

were attacked by Sutcliffe told the police that the voice on the tape wasn't their attacker's voice, that he was a local man with a Yorkshire accent, and they provided multiple photofits that closely resembled the killer. Joan Smith, a journalist who covered the murders at the time concludes, "experts' don't listen to women" (Smith, 2020). In this case, failure to perceive women as credible speakers, and therefore ignoring what they had to say, had lethal consequences.

The second branch of epistemic injustice, according to Fricker, is *hermeneutical injustice*. This is where the society does not have the collective hermeneutical resources to recognize something as an injustice. In other words, instead of ignoring the speech of a particular individual (testimonial injustice), the society, in general, does not recognize the claims of an oppressed social group because it has no language or theoretical framework to comprehend it. The example Fricker cites is sexual harassment. Before the term "sexual harassment" was coined in the 1970s, it had been going on as long as workplaces existed, but it was never discussed nor addressed. Having apt terminology allowed people to identify the problem and then to do something about it. Perhaps a more contemporary example is the movement to "decolonize" institutions. Before the term "decolonize" existed in its current usage, many institutions were based on colonial norms and frameworks, but without any conscious awareness of that fact (at least among the members of dominant social groups). Decolonizing provides the necessary language to draw attention to certain facts, like that museums in Europe are full of artifacts and artworks looted from former colonies and that university and school curricula fail to integrate the perspective of the colonized.

In a pioneering book *The Epistemology of Resistance*, José Medina argues that epistemic injustice can be addressed by creating "epistemic friction" – generating opposing narratives to dominant cultural discourses (Medina, 2013). Some people gain "meta-lucidity" – an insight into the ways in which the dominant society fails to recognize, listen to or understand the claims of the oppressed – and these meta-lucid individuals can promote epistemic friction and build up a following. An example he gives is Rosa Parks. She knew that segregation on buses in the Jim Crow South was an injustice. This knowledge led her to act – not giving up her seat on the bus to a White person. Her action opened other people's eyes and inspired many others to participate in the struggle for civil rights.

Epistemic injustice is the area of justice theory that has received the most attention from philosophers in recent years. It highlights that claims to injustice can refer not only to the distribution of resources but also to the ways in which individuals and social groups are perceived and (mis)treated, much like the recognition framework that preceded it.

4 Relational Egalitarianism

Theories of recognition and epistemic injustice have highlighted varieties of social injustice that are not captured by the distributive justice paradigm. However, most theorists of justice agree that *equality* is a key component of justice and that equality has a distributive or material component. So, what should that look like?

After Rawls's theory of distributive justice, another theory of distributive justice emerged, dubbed by Elizabeth Anderson as "luck egalitarianism." Luck egalitarians argued that Rawls failed to consider personal responsibility: Rawls argued that resources should be redistributed to the "worst-off" in society, but he failed to consider how those people became the worst-off in the first place; maybe it has something to do with the choices that those individuals have made. They argue that egalitarian justice demands that individuals are compensated for bad "brute luck," meaning whatever is outside of their control, for example, being born with a disability. However, individuals have to bear the consequences of bad "option luck," for example, if you choose to gamble your house in a card game and lose, that's your fault and the state should not intervene to help you, even if you end up homeless. Therefore, the "worst-off" in society is disaggregated into those who deserve support from the state and those who do not.

However, some egalitarians responded to luck egalitarianism by pointing out that it fails to adequately address what matters when talking about equality, and that it has potentially unjust consequences. In a famous article, “What is the Point of Equality?” Elizabeth Anderson argued that in compensating individuals for so-called bad brute luck, such as being born disabled, ugly, or otherwise talentless, luck egalitarians would have to create invasive bureaucratic procedures that judge individuals according to demeaning criteria and would intrusively investigate individuals’ personal choices. Luck egalitarianism could, in effect, create a two-tiered society with the “lucky” – the talented, good-looking, able-bodied people – compensating the pitiful, unlucky people – the untalented, ugly, disabled people – with cash pay-outs for their perceived flaws. Furthermore, those who have made unfortunate choices at some point in their life, are left to bear the consequences of this choice into perpetuity, so a luck egalitarian society leaves no room for making mistakes or taking risks. People who make bad choices or take risks are liable to social exclusion and ostracism. Such a society creates relations of disrespect (Anderson, 1999).

Anderson argued that what matters for equality is, therefore, social standing, or what she calls “democratic equality.” A just society should aim to create relations of respect between citizens. When it comes to the distribution of resources, the state should adopt the capabilities approach, championed by Amartya Sen (1979) and Martha Nussbaum (2000). Anderson (1999: 317–8) argues that the state has to ensure that every individual has sufficient resources to realize their capabilities as a human being, as a participant in a system of cooperative production, and as a citizen of a democracy. With this baseline level of distributive justice in place, the society will ensure that people have access to sufficient levels of functioning that enables them to stand as social equals over the course of their lifetime. Anderson’s intervention in the debate has led to a strand of literature known as “relational egalitarianism,” which seeks to address how the just society would create equal social standing and considers distributive justice a means to that end. Christopher Lebron has added an amendment to Anderson’s view. He claims that Anderson’s vision of democratic equality still perceives the disadvantaged in society as recipients and fails to address the responsibilities of the privileged. He argues that the privileged people in the society should cultivate the virtue of trying to see the world through the point of view of the other, in order to generate a human point of view of equality (Lebron, 2014).

5 Structural Injustice

Anderson made a further point, which is that luck egalitarians focus on luck, but no social movement ever has made arguments about justice or equality from the perspective of *luck*. Social movements care about *socially-caused* injustice. Even a classic luck egalitarian case of bad luck – disability – is much more complicated than they suppose. The disability rights movement is based on the social model of disability, which argues that society is disabling because the material infrastructure and social and institutional rules are designed with able-bodied people in mind. The problem is not disabled people’s bodies, the problem is the society in which they live. From this perspective, the society needs to change to accommodate people with various kinds of disabilities, rather than compensating individual disabled people for their “bad luck.”

The question arises, however, how does socially caused injustice come about? It will not be possible to remedy socially caused injustice without some account of its causation. This brings us back to where we started, with Iris Marion Young. In her late work, Young argued that instead of focusing on individuals, theorists of justice need to think about justice structurally. Rawls didn’t do this sufficiently because he focused on the “basic structure” of society, or what Young (2011: 70) calls “a small sub-set of its institutions.” Instead, Young argues that thinking structurally is a “way of looking” at society and requires taking a macro view.

Young (2011: 52–64) argues that “structural injustice” is the result of four interlocking processes. First, “objective constraint”: the material world in which individuals live is objectively constraining. For example, towns and cities in the US are designed with cars in mind, so people who do not have cars or can’t drive for whatever reason are disadvantaged. The material infrastructure constrains some individuals and enables others. Further, the social and legal norms of a society also constrain some individuals and enable others. Second, society is made up of social positions: sociologists think of society as a multi-dimensional space (Blau, 1977) or a field (Bourdieu and Nice, 1977) with individuals positioned in relation to each other. These positions condition and place limits on our interactions. This macro view also helps identify structural inequalities that persist over time. Third, individuals reproduce structures through their actions. For example, every time I buy a T-shirt from a budget online retailer, I reproduce the injustice of sweatshop labor (McKeown, 2018: 497). Fourth, all of these social-structural processes have unintended consequences. For instance, I don’t intend to exploit sweatshop workers, but the combination of my purchase of clothes, with the practices of multi-national clothing corporations seeking to reduce costs, and low-income countries seeking economic growth, results in groups of people – mostly young women of color – being exploited (McKeown, 2017).

The result of structural injustice is that certain groups are rendered vulnerable to domination or oppression (Young, 2011: 52). So structural injustice is the underlying cause of political inequality; it is the source of domination or oppression of various social groups. Because structural injustice is the outcome of so many complex processes, Young argues that no one is to blame for it. Instead, everyone connected to structural injustice should take up their “political responsibility” to work collectively to overcome it. This includes states, corporations, and individuals.

While I am broadly supportive of Young’s view, I argue that powerful agents, meaning agents with the capacity to remedy structural injustice, such as multi-national corporations and states, bear moral responsibility to address structural injustice (McKeown, n.d.). Continuing with the example of sweatshop labor, I do not have the capacity to change the structural processes that cause the race to the bottom in global garment supply chains – the lowering of wages, the excessive working hours, the lack of fire and building safety measures, etc. But some agents do have that capacity – the largest multi-national corporations (MNCs) in the industry. According to the McKinsey “State of Fashion 2019” report, a mere 20 corporations make 97% of profits in the global garment industry (a situation which has not significantly changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic – if anything, these corporations have consolidated their power) (Amed et al., 2018: 11, 2020: 111). These corporations set the rules of the game through private-private partnerships (partnerships between private corporations with no state involvement, such as the Ethical Trading Initiative) which determine how the industry will be regulated, and they act in various ways to maintain their domination over workers, such as lobbying. Moreover, large garment MNCs demonstrated their capacity to improve working conditions for garment workers after the Rana Plaza factory collapse in 2013, in which 1,134 people lost their lives. They implemented the Bangladesh Fire and Building Safety Accord; a legally-binding set of regulations that led to the inspection of over 2000 factories and the remediation of fire and building safety issues in 90% of cases. However, the Accord only lasted for 5 years (2013–18), with a 3-year extension to 2021; it is now being phased out. The Accord only addressed fire and building safety, not wages, working hours, or workers’ rights to unionize; and it only applied in Bangladesh. MNCs could have done a lot more to improve the conditions for workers in Bangladesh and they could implement similar measures across the whole sector, but they fail to do so. For that reason, I argue they are blameworthy for the perpetuation of structural injustice. Moreover, understanding the ways in which powerful agents act to maintain unjust structures provides insight into how structural change can occur.

The value of the structural injustice approach is that it reveals the economic, social, and political forces that combine to render some social groups vulnerable to oppression and domination. It has

also opened up a debate about who bears the responsibility to remedy the injustice that is embedded in these structures, acknowledging the necessary interconnection of individuals, institutions, and socio-political-economic structures. This is in contrast with the theorists who place the burden of responsibility for justice solely on particular institutions (Rawls, luck egalitarians), or on individuals (utilitarians).

6 Conclusion

The distributive paradigm of justice is impoverished, or at least incomplete, and it is a deep shame that it has dominated political philosophy so thoroughly over the last fifty years, only now releasing its grip (to some extent). As Katrina Forrester puts it, political philosophy has been living “in the shadow of justice,” meaning the shadow of Rawlsian distributive justice specifically. She argues that “The Rawlsian framework came to act as a constraint on what kind of theorizing could be done and what kind of politics could be imagined” (Forrester, 2019: 275).

Why was it so popular? Possibly, as Charles Mills argues, because White men completely dominated the profession until recent years, and they didn’t see or experience these other kinds of injustice outlined here and so didn’t consider them relevant. Claims to epistemic injustice, in particular, have developed since scholars from minority groups have become more integrated in the discipline. Another reason is the artificial distinction between Anglo-American and continental philosophy, with Anglo-American philosophers focusing on distributive justice and continental philosophers focusing on recognition, with the two branches rarely talking to one another. That is one of the reasons why Iris Marion Young’s work has been so innovative in the realm of social justice, because she worked within both frameworks. Katrina Forrester offers a historical explanation, which is that Rawls was committed to the kind of thinking that was dominant in his youth – the post-war New Deal era – and that luck egalitarians were influenced by the right-wing Reagan-Thatcher era of the 1980s, with its overweening emphasis on personal responsibility. Another reason might be the emphasis on “ideal theory” – theorizing about justice in the ideal – which edges out forms of injustice that are relational and the result of past injustice.

Whatever the explanation, it is now apparent that social injustice can take many forms. In this chapter, I have highlighted four: recognition, epistemic injustice, relational inequality, and structural injustice. Social justice, therefore, is not reducible to one single issue; it is multifaceted and a work in progress theoretically and in reality.

Note

- 1 Of course, Rawls did not only talk about the distribution of wealth, but also the distribution of the social primary goods, including things like the social bases of self-respect. However, Young acknowledges this and claims that another problem with the distributive paradigm is that it applies the logic of distribution to things that cannot be distributed like self-respect, rights or power. None of these things are entities that a state can distribute, they are relationships. I footnote this point because it will be of interest to the reader who is more engaged with contemporary political philosophy and will be concerned that Young made a strawman out of Rawls (which is an open question), but for the lay reader, the points in the body text are sufficient to capture Young’s view.

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Further Reading

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