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## Iris Marion Young and structural injustice

*Maeve McKeown in conversation with Alasia Nuti*

According to traditional theories of responsibility, we would not think that western consumers have any responsibility for the exploitation of sweatshop workers, as we are not connected to them in a way that moral philosophy has typically been able to understand. Iris Marion Young, however, wanted to make sense of the kind of responsibility that western activists felt when protesting global injustices. This led to her model of structural injustice and our responsibility for structural injustice. This conversation between two scholars of Young's work offers a clear overview of Young's diverse and influential philosophical output. McKeown and Nuti explore questions such as: are corporations to blame for their unjust practices? How do individuals assume responsibility for structural injustice without feeling completely powerless in the face of so many injustices? What is the relationship between activism and political theory?

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ALASIA NUTI is a lecturer in the department of politics at the University of York. She works in contemporary political theory and gender studies, and has a strong interest in postcolonial theory and critical race theory.

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Alasia Nuti (AN): Who was Iris Marion Young and why has she become this very important political philosopher. Also, when and how did you come across her work, and what do you find so appealing in her writings?

Maeve McKeown (MM): Iris Marion Young is the greatest! Anyone who is interested in philosophy, political theory, or feminism, needs to read her work. She was born in 1949 and died in 2006 at the age of 56, which was a big loss for the political theory community. She contributed to pretty much every area of contemporary political theory: in her early work she dealt with justice theory, democratic theory, feminist phenomenology, and Marxist feminism, and in her later work, structural injustice and global political issues. She seemed to enter a research area in political theory, say some amazing things, and then move onto another area! While she was certainly a big name in academia, especially after her 1990 book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, it is only in the last 15 years that her work has taken on a life of its own to the extent that she has almost become part of the canon. There are many people who would consider themselves Iris Marion Young scholars; she has developed that kind of gravitas.

I came across her writings for the first time during my undergraduate degree. I studied politics and international relations at the University of Manchester. At the time, a lot of the degree was leaving me cold – I was not especially interested in the political science aspect and a lot of the theory was dead white men talking about things that didn't relate to my life in any meaningful way. I was interested in global issues, but found the political philosophy literature on global justice abstract and detached. It was mostly focused (as most justice theory in the last 60 years has been) on John Rawls, and it certainly did not speak to me as an activist. I had been involved in activism since joining the anti-sweatshop protests in Belfast when I was 15-years' old. To me, activism and protest were what global justice was about, and yet nobody in the philosophy literature was talking about that. When I read Young's 2006 essay, "Responsibility and global justice: a social connection model", I immediately realized that this was what I had been waiting for. She takes the anti-sweatshop movement as her starting point for addressing wider questions related to global justice, such as why people are protesting when they are far removed from sweatshop workers in other countries. According to traditional theories of responsibility, we would not think that western consumers have any responsibility for sweatshop workers, as we are not connected to them in a way that moral philosophy can understand. But Young wanted to make sense of the kind of responsibility that these protesters felt. This is

what she was doing when she started thinking about structural injustice, and our responsibility for structural injustice. And this just lit a fire for me which has kept me engaging with her work ever since.

**AN:** In a sense, she anticipated a recent trend in political theory which is to understand activism *as* political theory. In other words, rather than just using cases of activism to enrich what she was saying theoretically or normatively, she really considered activism as a source for political theorizing. While this kind of approach is more common today (in no small part due to her pioneering work), at that time it was quite exceptional – at least in mainstream academia. Within activism, there has always been an understanding of injustice as being structural, but nonetheless the way in which Young formulated her concept of structural injustice was incredibly fresh and original. What was structural injustice for Iris Marion Young, and what does it mean for you?

**MM:** Part of Young's inspiration for thinking about structural injustice came from her engagement with sociology. There are four aspects to her structural injustice model and these all relate to socio-structural processes rather than being static – these are all things that are happening all the time.

The first aspect is what she calls “objective constraint”. This is where the structures of society are constraining; they constrain your options for action. This can be related to the material infrastructure, for example, it is not easy to ride a bike if you live in a city where there are no bike lanes and there is a lot of traffic. So, the material infrastructure constrains your options for acting in that way. But in addition to these material constraints, our options for action can be constrained laws, by social norms around gender, race, or ability, by the ways that you look and present yourself, and so on. All of these things constrain what we can and cannot do in society. The second aspect is “social position”. In society, we are all positioned in different ways within the social field. Some people are positioned at the top and have a lot of resources at their disposal and a lot of opportunities for action, while others are positioned so that they do not have many options for action. The third aspect is the idea that we reproduce structures through our actions – an idea that Young adapted from the British sociologist Anthony Giddens and his theory of structuration. Giddens argues that,

for example, when I use the English language, I'm reproducing the English language. Whenever we participate in the social structure, we're both drawing upon that structure and reproducing it through our actions. The fourth aspect is what she calls "counter-finality" whereby the coming together of all these different processes results in unintended outcomes. It's a kind of "tragedy of the commons" situation. We're all doing our individual thing and it results in bad consequences. She gives homelessness as a domestic example of structural injustice, and sweatshop labour as a global example of structural injustice.

**AN:** If we consider the homelessness example, simple distribution of money, for example, seems to be a clear solution to resolve the structural injustice they suffer from. But in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Young argued that structural injustice is totally different from economic distributive justice. Why was she so critical of the distributive justice paradigm?

**MM:** Young was not saying that we should get rid of distributive justice; rather, she is saying that distributive justice is not enough. Part of the solution to homelessness *will* involve redistributing resources. But it is also intimately related to other forms of structure. She gives the example of a single mother of two who finds herself homeless through no fault of her own, just because she cannot find an affordable place to live that is near her place of work. While landlords may not be *actively* discriminating against her, they may be implicitly discriminating against her because she is a single mother. You can see numerous different factors at play here: there is the material infrastructure that is constraining the places where she can live; there are social norms that lead to discrimination against her; there is the housing market which is not properly regulated, allowing some investors to become extremely rich at the expense of vast swathes of people who cannot find any form of housing. All of these different structures need intervention if we are going to make a difference to homelessness in the long term. Redistributing resources is only looking at one part of the problem, and it does not make any meaningful intervention in the unjust structures.

**AN:** This discussion brings to mind Young's idea of the "five faces of oppression", which showed how people are oppressed

even beyond distributive concerns. Her intuitions were partly rooted in her worries about treating certain things as resources that can be distributed. For example, when we think about power and rights, these are not things that can just be distributed across a population; rather, they are *relations* in which we are embedded.

**MM:** Absolutely. In *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, she argued that the distributive paradigm of justice leaves out at least three things: one is the division of labour: why are the top jobs occupied by white men? Why are some jobs feminized and associated with women? Why are some jobs associated with people of colour? Another factor is decision-making power: who gets to make the decisions about distributions of resources? And the third one is culture: why is white western culture dominant globally? Why are patriarchal norms and imagery dominant? Young certainly did not wish to get rid of distributive justice, but rather was encouraging us to pay attention to all the things that this distributive justice framework is not allowing us to think about, and that we really need to think about if we are to do justice theory properly.

**AN:** What do you think Young got wrong or overlooked in her account of structural injustice?

**MM:** A lot of people have taken this concept of structural injustice and applied it to many different cases of injustice in the world, trying to show how these injustices are built into social, economic and political structures. As a result, they are very difficult to change, and so Young argues that the responsibility for making the necessary changes does not fall to any particular agent; rather, there needs to be collective action. Where I think that Young went wrong was that by not wishing to identify individual agents, she did not take sufficient account of the responsibility of the more powerful agents within these structures. We may all be constrained by structures and structural injustice, but some agents are less constrained than others. To take the sweatshops example: a massive corporation like Inditex (which owns brands like Zara) is clearly in a position to make some changes within the global garment industry. The idea that it is so constrained that it cannot bear moral responsibility for the injustices of the sweatshop industry is a bit difficult to swallow. In my work, I argue that there are different

kinds of structural injustice, depending on what role powerful agents play in reproducing the injustice.

In her posthumously published 2011 book *Responsibility for Justice*, Young argues that if we blame powerful agents, they will just get defensive and then they won't do anything. And she pretty much leaves it at that! But this conclusion is unsatisfactory because this is not what actually happens in the real world when it comes to corporate scandals. An example of this in the global garment industry was the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh in 2013 in which over 1,000 people were killed. At that point, consumers came together to protest the treatment of the workers and their working conditions. Consumers pointed out that there was not just criminal responsibility here, but also moral responsibility on the part of the corporations that are using unsafe factories. As a result, the corporations came together and signed up to the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh. The Accord was very limited in scope – it was only about fire and building safety, it was not about workers' rights, rights to unionize, and so on – but it did make a difference. It led to significant changes in terms of fire and building safety in Bangladesh for the period in which it was in operation. This was clear evidence that blaming corporations *can* lead to change and that there are things corporations can do to improve a structural injustice like sweatshop labour. It also demonstrates that there is a huge amount more that they *could* be doing: they could be improving fire and building safety in other countries, not just in Bangladesh; they could be improving wages; they could be improving rights to unionize, and so on. There is a lot of room for manoeuvre that these powerful agents have within these structures that I think Young didn't adequately account for.

**AN:** When you consider some kinds of structural injustice, such as global inequality, gender inequality, racial inequality, or historical injustices like colonialism and slavery, thinking that no one is blameless really seems to go against our intuitions of injustice and responsibility. This is not to say that Young did not have an important point to make – namely, that even if some people are not to blame for a particular injustice, they may still have certain *responsibilities* in relation to that injustice. But perhaps dispensing with blame completely at the structural level was not the right move. We have already discussed some ideas connected to responsibility of structural injustice,



but I am keen for you to clarify: what does it mean to be responsible for structural injustice?

**MM:** Young argues that there are two models of responsibility. The traditional model of responsibility in moral philosophy and law is what she calls the “liability model”. On the liability model of responsibility, a person has to have directly caused harm with intent to cause harm and knowledge of the likely consequences of their actions. Young argues that in the context of structural injustice, this liability model doesn’t make sense. When I buy a t-shirt from a shop, I don’t intend to harm sweatshop workers; I’m not directly harming them. I don’t actually know what the outcome of my action is going to be because the money from my purchase of the t-shirt might end up paying the shop workers in that particular shop; it might end up paying the rental cost of the building; it could go to all sorts of places. In short, I don’t *know* that it is directly exploiting a worker in a sweatshop. In the face of the shortcomings of this model, Young argued that we need a different conception of responsibility, which she called the “social connection model”. According to this, anyone who is connected to a structural injustice shares a political responsibility to collectively organize to struggle against it. The *political* responsibility entailed by the social connection model is very different to the *moral* responsibility entailed by the liability model. For a start, it does not involve blame. For Young, we are not to blame for structural injustice but we do share political responsibility to collectively organize to try and change it if we are connected to it in some way. That is how she tries to get around the limitations she sees in conventional theories of moral responsibility. But there is a big debate about whether or not that actually works!

**AN:** Young drew inspiration from Hannah Arendt’s distinction between moral and political responsibility. Please can you say something about Arendt’s framework and why Young found it so fruitful?

**MM:** When Arendt was making this distinction, she was thinking through responsibility for the Holocaust. She distinguished those senior officials in the Nazi party who organized and oversaw the Holocaust, and who are morally responsible and legally responsible for it, from ordinary German citizens whose responsibility did not make sense through the lens of

moral and legal responsibility. Could an average German citizen, who probably knew about the concentration camps but did not know the extent of the killing, really be said to be guilty in the same way that someone like Adolf Eichmann was guilty? Arendt thought not, which is why she introduced the idea of *political* responsibility. For Arendt, this meant a responsibility to uphold the public political sphere in which the citizens were living. She thought that the German citizens of the time had failed to do that. They had abdicated their political responsibility, retreated into their own personal lives, and left the public political sphere to be taken over by the Nazis. For Arendt, political responsibility is collective responsibility for a political community, but this is distinct from the guilt which applies to individuals for their particular wrongful deeds. Guilt is a function of legal and moral responsibility; political responsibility is something distinct. Young adopts this distinction, albeit with significant revisions, to develop her own distinction between our general responsibilities to other people to whom we are connected within our daily lives, and this further political responsibility we have to everyone to whom we are connected through unjust structures.

**AN:** We have discussed the responsibilities of very powerful agents like corporations, but when we start thinking about the responsibility that ordinary people have to change unjust structures, there may be a feeling that we are embedded in so many unjust structures and that we contribute to these injustices simply by exercising our agency. This could easily leave us feeling completely powerless because there are just too many injustices! Did Young think about this issue? Did she try to come up with a solution for the “overwhelmed ordinary person”?

**MM:** It certainly does seem overwhelming! When you think about the prevalence of structural injustices in the world, it’s not just sweatshop labour and homelessness – it’s structural racism, structural sexism, the climate crisis. The list goes on. And the natural response may be, “If I’m responsible for all of this because I’m connected to all of it, what do I do!?” It can lead to complete overwhelm and existential dread. In the face of this, Young tried to come up with what she calls “parameters of reasoning” for thinking about how to take up political responsibility. The first parameter she came up with was “power”:

how much power do you have in relation to a structural injustice? She says that the power you have determines what kind of structural injustice you should be working on. So, if you have some sort of power in relation to a particular structural injustice, you should focus your energies on that injustice. The second parameter of reasoning is “privilege”: if you are benefiting from an injustice, that’s the injustice that you should focus on. The third is “interest”: how interested are you in a particular injustice? Getting involved in anti-sweatshop activism was something I was passionate about; that can be a way to get involved in collective action. But, for Young, interest is also about whether you are a *victim* of structural injustice. This is one of the controversial aspects of her theory, because she says that everyone connected to a structural injustice shares responsibility to change it – including the victims. And the fourth parameter of reasoning is “collective ability”: if you are already a member of a collective, you can focus your energies through your collective. If you are part of a university, for example, you can campaign to make sure that all the clothing that has the university logo on it is fair-trade; you can campaign for divestment from fossil fuels; you can campaign about zero-hours contracts and outsourcing work to companies that aren’t treating their workers properly. We can use our position within a collective to try and do something about structural injustice.

This formulation has been criticized by many political philosophers for being too vague. There is an obsession in analytic, liberal, political philosophy with assigning specific duties to specific agents, which tells them *exactly* what they have to do. But Young is saying: this is way more complicated than that; it is *so* complex. Every person is positioned completely differently in relation to different structural injustices, and because of this we need to be able to think about it for ourselves. She preferred the “parameters of reasoning” model because she considered it a framework that can help you think about these issues and then do what you think is the right thing to do. But this is never going to be a neat process. Activism is about trial and error, and some of it will not be effective; some of it may even be counterproductive. In fact, one of the main reasons that she wanted to include the victims in political responsibility was so that activists, especially people in the Global North who might be far removed from some of these injustices, don’t go around doing counterproductive things. By listening to the

victims and taking their perspective into account, everyone can use that when thinking about how to act on their political responsibility for structural injustice.

#### FURTHER RESOURCES

- Maeve McKeown, *With Power Comes Responsibility: The Politics of Structural Injustice*. London: Bloomsbury, 2023.
- Maeve McKeown, "Responsibility". *The Philosopher* 110:2 (2022).
- Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- Robin Zheng, "What is my role in changing the system? A new model of responsibility for structural injustice". *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 21 (2018): 869–85.