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On the limits of liberalism: Teaching Iris Marion Young in Scotland

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Abstract
In this short essay, I reflect on my experience teaching Iris Marion Young in Scotland and how *Justice and Politics of Difference* helped both my students and me think more carefully about oppression, particularly at a time and in a context in which race, gender and sexuality took a backseat to debates about class and capitalism. Young helped me feel less alone in a discipline that works hard to obscure, deprioritise and devalue empirical and theoretical work on race, gender and sexuality. However, Young's work illuminates not only political science's limited understandings of oppression and inequality, it also demonstrates the limitations of her own normative position about liberal democracy's (in)ability to realise social justice.

Keywords: liberal democracy, welfare, social justice, race, class, gender, sexuality

There are a myriad of issues that drove me away from political science as a discipline in both the United States and the United Kingdom. I trained in political science but sought refuge in the cognate discipline of sociology (which, believe me, has its own problems). Although key arguments and texts from contemporary political theory have profoundly shaped me as a scholar—Patricia Hill Collins's conceptualizations of Black feminism,[1] Nancy Fraser's

[1] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Routledge, 2000).

redistribution/recognition paradigm,[2] Charles W. Mills's theorization of the racial contract[3]—political science's apparent fascination with and desire to be in proximity to institutional power; the still yet-to-be-fixed "leaky pipeline" that systematically siphons out promising women of color academics; and the desire *not* to see the world as it is, to willingly choose blindness—has left me reeling. Although I do not attend them regularly anymore, I always felt marooned at political science conferences. It was as if I was the only one left in Plato's cave, looking at the shadows on the wall and ignoring "reality" just outside the entrance.

In other words, I always feel profoundly alone in political science. In terms of problem definition and analysis—especially in my subdiscipline of gender and politics—my colleagues and I are not simply on different pages, we are in completely different books. We are coming from such different starting points that we cannot agree on the very nature of reality. This is obviously *not all* political science and political scientists but the dominant tendency of a discipline I find to be almost comically orthodox and conservative. Reading Barnor Hesse's and Robbie Shilliam's work[4] about and against the taken-for-granted notions of the discipline and its canon has helped me understand the nature of my alienation and how this is a structural condition of political science which has been shaped by unacknowledged white supremacist and colonial ideas and practices.

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[2] Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking Recognition." *New Left Review* 3 (2000): 107.

[3] Charles W. Mills, "White ignorance," In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 13–38.

[4] Barnor Hesse, "Racialized Modernity: An Analytics of White Mythologies." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 4 (2007): 643-663; Barnor Hesse, "Escaping Liberty: Western Hegemony, Black Fugitivity." *Political Theory* 42, no. 3 (2014): 288-313; Robbie Shilliam, *Decolonizing Politics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

One book that helped me feel less alone, although I can now see more clearly many of its shortcomings, is Iris Marion Young's classic, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.[5] In my first permanent academic job in Scotland way back in the early 2000s, I was tasked with teaching an introductory class on the theory and practice of social justice to an interdisciplinary group of students who were to be the future workers of the Scottish welfare state: teachers, social workers, community development practitioners, and youth workers. For me, it was essential to equip my students with a history and critical analysis of social justice. At that time, "social justice" was high on the Scottish Government's agenda: from health to education to housing. There was a broad consensus on the center-left at that time that social justice was one of the main goals of policymaking.

What was important to me was to encourage my undergraduate students to take a more expansive view about what social justice is and could be. Then, as now, Scottish policymaking attempts to keep alive the post-war consensus—the compromise political parties forged in the aftermath of the Second World War in Britain for a new social and economic order based, in part, on Keynesian economics and an active and interventionist welfare state. From this perspective, social justice is broadly understood as a redistributive politics and implemented via relatively high taxes, especially for the top earners, and well-funded public services ranging from, but not limited to, health, education, public transport, and housing. For sure, there were dissenters to this model, not least the socialist and communist left who argued that the social welfare consensus undermined the revolutionary fervor of the working class as well as the neoliberal right who were committed to laissez-

[5] Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

faire capitalism. Whilst Thatcherism, as an ideology, never quite took hold in Scotland, its economic consequences are still deeply felt today. Tony Blair and Gordon Brown's New Labour project made more effective inroads ideologically in the late 1990s and early 2000s even though many of its social and economic policies were profoundly influenced by Thatcher's free market revolution. Nevertheless, in the 2000s, via a re-established Scottish Parliament, social justice as expressed in policymaking by Scottish Labour and then, from 2007, by Scottish National Party governments, was broadly understood in redistributive terms.

This pre-2008 economic crisis, pre-austerity world seems almost unimaginable these days. But it is important to resist romanticizing this time. As a Black American living in Scotland, I always found it curious that politics about race, gender, and sexuality appeared to be missing from mainstream public debates. Of course they were there, lurking just below the surface, influencing conversations and shaping public life but unacknowledged and implicit. Understanding how race, gender, and sexuality are mobilized in different ways in Scotland was essential to supporting my students to critically engage with ideas of social justice. For instance, the self-understanding of Scottishness and Scottish identity is to be unlike and, in many cases, opposed to, England and Englishness. This translates into the rather counterintuitive dynamic in which the activated Other in Scottish politics is not, for the most part, a racialized Other, but the English. As such, no far-right political entrepreneur has been able to effectively use the typical far-right playbook of demonizing migrants for electoral gain. This has also meant that Scottish nationalism does not follow the now-familiar path of welfare chauvinism and blood and soil white supremacism. Instead, Scottish nationalism is practiced as multicultural and welcoming to those who wish to help build a nation based on Scottish self-determination, fairness, and justice. That this expression of

Scottishness blinds us to many other kinds of inequalities beyond income and wealth disparities is important and it was part of the challenge of teaching social justice almost twenty years ago.

For my Scottish students, I wanted to help them understand social justice as multifaceted and complex. I saw that an important part of my job was helping them consider an idea of justice that embraces a politics of redistribution *whilst also* understanding how the thinking and practices of class, capitalism, and distributive justice are always entangled with our understandings of race, gender, and sexuality. How we think about fairness cannot be separated from whom a given society considers human and, thus, deserving of care and protection. Beyond Nancy Fraser's work, it was surprisingly difficult to find good theory that seriously engaged with race, gender, and sexuality to share with my students. To be honest, I was a little shocked when I revisited the big beasts writing about theories of justice, and, by extension, solidarity. I had not read Rawls[6], Rorty[7], and Habermas[8] since my undergraduate days and they seemed mostly embarrassed by or completely ignored the fact of racism, sexism, and homophobia and explained it away rather than considering how these ideologies challenge their ideas of fairness, equality, and democracy. However, in my frantic search for a text that would inspire and challenge my students, I finally stumbled across Iris Marion Young.

Reading *Justice and the Politics of Difference* with my students was exciting and disruptive. The first big issue I had to confront was how to help them think about the basic

[6] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press., 1999).
[7] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
[8] Jürgen Habermas, *Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2018).

concepts of the book outside the hegemonic American framing of the problem and potential solutions. Taking "difference" seriously is not a particularly American dilemma it is just that in American politics, despite an on-going right-wing backlash, it is legitimate and possible to consider the good society whilst taking race, class, gender, and sexuality seriously. In Europe it is entirely possible and indeed, preferable, to discuss justice without addressing race and, increasingly, gender and sexuality. The rise of so-call left authoritarianism or left conservativism in which the old social democratic parties support a pro-welfare, anti-immigrant platform is increasingly common across Europe. Scotland is not immune to such currents. Working with my students to try to understand difference on distinctly European terms has been deeply satisfying and illuminating not least for how it exposes the myths and hypocrisies of European liberalism.

Young begins her text seeking to reframe how we think about justice: "Instead of focusing on distribution, a conception of justice should begin with concepts of domination and oppression." She goes on, "such a shift brings out issues of decision-making, division of labor and culture that bear on social justice but are often ignored in philosophical discussions."[9] Thinking about justice from this very different starting point helped both me and my students articulate the banal, everyday injustices that are somehow not seen as important or urgent. Naming domination and oppression beyond capitalist exploitation is essential to bring into focus other dynamics of harm, exclusion, and disrespect that are equally as damaging and violent. Indeed, what is so helpful about Young's understanding of justice is her taking seriously the power differentials between different social groups. By analyzing how power operates to advantage some groups and disadvantage others, we can

[9] Ibid., 3.

understand more clearly and precisely how injustice manifests and is reproduced via group interactions and, crucially, institutions which systematically uphold injustices.

Reading Young with my students, I think we found it powerful but rather awkward that she insists on using the word "oppression." As she acknowledges even writing about it in 1990, the word seems outdated, a throwback to the revolutionary social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Certainly, reading Young during the early 2000s, I found the word curious and almost embarrassing. Probably because in deploying it, oppression contains within it a critique and a call to action. One does not use this word lightly, since it interpellates, it forces a reaction, it demands engagement. For some students, the use of this term ruled Young out as a "serious thinker" as she was self-evidently partisan and not dispassionate and distant such as Rawls. For other students, Young gave them permission to delve deeply into their personal experiences of injustice and to consider the emotional, physical, and psychological consequences of the domination and exclusion they, their families and friends had endured. As for myself, I think Young's insistence on using the term oppression freed me from the abstract objectivity that academia often demands from us. Using this politically loaded term helped me inject urgency into the theory and practice of social justice and communicate that to my students.

Young defines social justice as the "elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression."[10] She argues that "justice should refer not only to distribution but also to institutional conditions necessary for the development and exercise of individual capacities and collective communication and cooperation."[11] She argues that "a goal of social

[10] Ibid., 15.

[11] Ibid., 39.

justice…is social equality. Equality refers…primarily to the full participation and inclusion of everyone in a society's major institutions and the socially supported substantive opportunity for all to develop and exercise their capacities and realize their choices."[12] Social justice, then, is not simply about the fair redistribution of life's benefits and burdens but also the positive actions of institutions that directly support the development of our highest and best selves. I suppose in one way or another, I am always thinking about Young's now famous "Five Faces of Oppression" framework. Her discussion of exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence, rather paradoxically, summarize what I find to be the most interesting but also the greatest limitations of her work.

Young gives an excellent overview of exploitation based on race, class, and gender. She shows us how labor value is extracted from workers and she is careful to delineate the different processes of that exploitation based on race and gender. She discusses how people can be rendered superfluous and disposable in relation to their usefulness to capitalist production. She demonstrates how agency can be robbed of people by sapping them of their creativity and dismissing their talents. Her discussion of the violence of universalizing and imposing a particular group's norms and values onto others and the misrecognition of others that inevitably follows from such a process is especially adept. Finally, she shows us how oppression can be raw, naked, and systemic violence—physical, psychological, discursive.

Amongst my students, I recall there being mixed reactions to her delineation of the five faces of oppression. Many students were quick to dismiss her argument as only relevant in America and that, beyond a discussion of class exploitation, these other issues were not

[12] Ibid., 173.

big challenges facing Scottish society. There were several unstated dynamics undergirding this position. For many of my students, I was one of the first Black people they had ever met, and certainly the first to be in a position of authority over them. For race and racism to be operative and relevant required the (disruptive) presence of people of color. At that time, Scotland was 98% white and so many of my students could not believe institutionalized and everyday racism could be a fact of life with so few people of color living in the country.

Teaching in Glasgow at that time, people would proudly tell me that Scotland's largest city flourished as the "second city of empire." There was chagrin that this once-prosperous city had fallen on hard times after the one-two punch of the collapse of imperial trading and de-industrialization. In Scotland, the denial of white supremacy and a deep and wilful ignorance about colonial history and Scotland's active participation in it, helps facilitate a seemingly open and welcoming sense of Scottishness and its particular form of left-wing nationalism. The struggle with my students was that I had to teach political theory, sociology, and history simultaneously to have a meaningful and critical discussion about what fairness and justice could be. Indeed, I am indebted to Young's delineation of the "Five Faces of Oppression" for forcing me to delve deeper into Scotland's colonial history a decade before it became fashionable in academic circles to discuss "decolonization."

Given the litany of catastrophes Young outlines via her five faces of oppression framework, her proposition of a politics of difference does not seem to meet the moment and the enormity of the task that a socially just society would necessitate. I understand better now that her discussion about difference is really a response to the critiques of multiculturalism in 1980s and 1990s—Charles Taylor and his retinue of theorists hand-wringing about challenges to universality, stable identities, and skeptical of that perennial

bugbear, identity politics. Beyond this niche debate within political theory that does not interest me in the slightest, re-reading her text now, I am struck by Young's defense of and commitment to liberal democracy. When reading this text with my students almost twenty years ago, her championing of a welfare state and positive social rights, something rather shabby and absent in the American context but a lived reality in Scotland, made it easier to have these discussions about the good society and how to make the welfare state work better for everyone. But as austerity has relentlessly cut, shrunk, and privatized the welfare state, bankrupted local authorities, immiserated millions, and as an anti-immigrant backlash and welfare chauvinism profoundly re-shapes European politics, I can see more clearly how a defense of the old post-war settlement, a return to how things were from the 1950s to the 1980s cannot and will not address the interconnected crises of today nor, for that matter, actually impact on the five faces of oppression since they were (re)produced under the very system to which Young wishes to return, or at least in American terms, build anew.

Reading Young alongside Charles W. Mills's work on the racial contract or Juliet Hooker's work on racialized solidarity demonstrates the shortcomings of her vision.[13] Without attending to the underlying structure of racial domination that has shaped who we consider human and with whom we self-identify and wish to build community, it is not possible to ever achieve the justice that Young outlines.[14] Her "politics of difference" is in no way up to the task of tackling her five faces of oppression nor addressing the politics of white supremacy, patriarchy, and queerphobia which shapes all our lives. I guess the question here is whether liberal democracy, despite all its shortcomings, can be reformed

[13] Mills 2007; Juliet Hooker, *Race and the Politics of Solidarity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[14] Akwugo Emejulu, *Fugitive Feminism* (London, Silver Press, 2022).

for the benefit of everyone. Perhaps seeking anything but a positive affirmation from a democratic theorist is unfair. But when looking around at the world we live in now, with liberal democracy under attack and in retreat, this is an opportunity to evaluate the claims of democracy and consider some hard truths about who democracy serves, who it fails, and why.

When we look at systemic police killings of Black people in the United States or the Mediterranean drownings of those seeking refuge in the Europe; or the attack on trans people and the rolling back of bodily autonomy; or the precarity of housing and employment; these horrors have all been facilitated by liberal democratic institutions in the name of defending those self-same institutions. This kind of violence cannot be justified nor reformed. It does not follow that simply because the far right is anti-democratic and hell bent on destroying democratic institutions that those of us concerned with social justice must automatically and non-critically defend these institutions which wreak havoc and misery upon the most marginalized. We must think again about the kinds of institutional structures and social relations we want that will enable the liberation of everyone. We have to think about governing institutions that are not dependent on capitalist relations of extraction and exploitation. We have to consider social relations beyond a zero-sum in which whiteness protects itself at the expense of all life on this planet. We have to think of ways to exist on this planet that does not treat non-human animals and the wider environment as externalities. Young is a theorist and so we cannot necessarily look to her to help us implement and put into practice these ideas and values. However, we do have to consider our limited horizons and vocabulary when using her work. I think Young's text works best to help us see how democratic institutions fail and challenge us to think about the multifaceted nature of injustice. Young can only take us so far down the road. As Audre

Lorde argued, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."[15] To build a new world we need other visionaries and other methods to help us desire more and better for ourselves beyond the deeply compromised and now-faltering liberal democratic institutions.

Biography

Akwugo Emejulu is Chair in Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield. Her research interests include the political sociology of race, class and gender and women of colour's grassroots activism in Europe and the United States. She is the author of several books including *Precarious Solidarity* (forthcoming, Manchester University Press), *Fugitive Feminism* (Silver Press 2022) and *Minority Women and Austerity: Survival and Resistance in France and Britain* (Policy Press, 2017). She is co-editor of *To Exist is to Resist: Black Feminism in Europe* (Pluto Press, 2019).

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[15] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York City: Crossing Press, 2009): 110.