

Iris Marion Young: Legacies for Feminist Theory

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Iris Marion Young was a fighter for justice and against oppression. A strong commitment, a commitment there as long as any of us had known her, fueled her writing and her activism. Her feminism was part of that commitment to justice. Her attention and sensitivity to the oppression of others was informed by an acute eye to the ways she herself – and all women – have to face the threats of economic exploitation, social marginalization, powerlessness, cultural hegemony, and systematic violence.

In the early essay “Throwing Like a Girl” Young used her own experience as a fulcrum to pry out an understanding of the inhibitions that women internalize. Her entire corpus sprouted from the synergistic interaction of her apprehension of the experience of herself and others, her philosophical background and understanding, and her keen analytic insight. And in her recent work “Menstrual Meditations” (2005), she returned to the powerful, image-laden technique of “Throwing Like a Girl,” both to point out the implications of hiding one’s menstrual period and to craft alternate ideals for one’s body in the world.

Young’s perspective and insight were often paradigm shifting. Early on in her work, for example, she criticized “dual systems theory” (in which two systems, patriarchy and capitalism, oppress women) on the grounds that its parallelism allows Marxist theory to remain unchanged. At the time, that theory had more or less grounded my own thinking as well as that of many others. Her essay produced the kind of rock-bottom conceptual jolt that leaves your thought forever changed.

Her work on justice always had the oppression of real people at its center. She worked on the abstract questions of justice by forging intellectual tools that helped those who are marginalized or oppressed

figure out their position and how to get out of it, and forced the more powerful to recognize how they oppressed others.

As she wrote on justice, Young made a set of lasting contributions to the understanding of deliberative democracy. She argued along with Lynn Sanders, for example, that traditional understandings of deliberation excluded or marginalized the ways of interacting that the less powerful were more likely to use, such as greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling. In one of many memorable insights, she criticized prevailing views of what empathy in deliberation required, pointing out that when asked to put ourselves in the position of, for instance, a person in a wheelchair, we cannot actually imagine the point of view of another but instead tend to project onto others our own fears and fantasies. So we must find ways to empower the other to speak or at least recognize our limitations in projection. In both these cases and in many others, my own thought changed radically after reading what Young had written.

That kind of straightforward, penetrating insight was what many feminist theorists depended on from Young. But it was not predictable in advance. In the years since her death I have often thought, when writing something, "What would Iris say?" And I haven't had any idea. She picked up a subject, turned it around, examined it, fixed it with her sharp eye, and said something you had not anticipated but thought was just right. Or thought was wrong — but the way you decided it was wrong made you think more sharply about the entire issue.

Her death was a great loss for the world, for feminism, and for feminist theory in particular. She lived the questions. She saw her own self, body, and consciousness as embedded in the issues we all live, every day. And when she used that consciousness of her consciousness as a lens on the world, she taught us all.

The Caucus for Women in Political Science, the Women and Politics Section of the American Political Science Association, and the Foundations of Political Theory group of the American Political Science Association have jointly established the Susan Moller Okin–Iris Marion Young award for the best annual journal article in feminist political theory. But no award could be a sufficient reminder of Iris's contributions.

Similarly, the essays that follow, initially presented as papers at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, are intended as a tribute to Iris Marion Young. But no tribute could be sufficient. We can only draw attention to and carry forward the themes in Young's work that continue to help us make sense of our world.

Difference and Social Structure: Iris Young's Legacy of a Critical Social Theory of Gender

S. Laurel Weldon

The Pragmatics of Iris Marion Young's Feminist Historical Materialism

Mary Hawkesworth

Reflections on Iris Marion Young's Justice and the Politics of Difference

Martha Ackelsberg and Mary Lyndon Shanley

Phenomenology and Structure: The Binocular Vision of Iris Marion Young

Sonia Kruks

House, Home and Homeland

Carole Pateman

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Difference and Social Structure: Iris Young's Legacy of a Critical Social Theory of Gender*S. Laurel Weldon, Purdue University*

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Iris Young was a wide-ranging political and social theorist whose works transformed the study of democratic theory, theories of justice, multiculturalism, nationalism, and group rights, among others — all of this in addition to her enormous contribution to feminist theory. Young left not only specific substantive legacies but also her method as a critical social theorist: She sought to undertake projects that helped make sense of the claims and analyses made by progressive social movements, including feminist movements, by providing a philosophical grounding