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## **A Response to the Distributive Paradigm**

Iris Marion Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, while normative in proposing how we ought to think of injustice manifestly, thus implying an idea of what constitutes a just society conversely, is a non-ideal theory in its acknowledgement of oppression already having taken place. Young responds to John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* and his distributive paradigm that declares justice to be no more than the proper allocation of benefits and burdens (Rawls 47) and asserts that the extent of equity reaches far beyond just that of material goods and opportunity: "it tends to focus thinking about social justice on the allocation of material goods such as things, resources, income, and wealth, or on social positions, especially jobs. This focus tends to ignore the social structure and institutional context that often help determine distributive patterns" (Young 15). Young, in turn, provides her own definition of social justice to be "the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression" (Young 15). Young argues that the distributive paradigm, while relevant, fails to account for the societal distribution of unmeasurable, intangible immaterial goods, like that of self-respect and self-determination, and therefore, her five faces of oppression provide a more adequate analysis of injustice.

### **Structural Oppression**

Structural injustice, or rather structural oppression, as defined by Young, "refers to systemic constraints on groups that are not necessarily the result of the intentions of a tyrant. Oppression in this sense is structural, rather than the result of a few people's choices or policies. Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules" (Young

41). In the case of structural oppression, removing the individuals from their positions of power would not stop the injustice from afflicting the oppressed population due to the extent to which it has been woven into the institutions and social structures of the society. Young asserts that one can be an oppressor without their intending to be one and employs “five faces of oppression” to better illustrate how this structural injustice manifests itself in the American society.

The first face of oppression, namely “exploitation,” persists through “private ownership of the means of production, and through markets that allocate labor and their ability to buy goods, capitalism systematically transfers the power of some to others, thereby augmenting the power of the latter” (Young 49). As a result, the empowered group is able to dominate the group from which they have extracted benefits and limit their ability to advocate against the domination of their labor and profit potential, a perpetual cycle of oppression. The second face, “marginalization,” constitutes in the “marginals--people the system of labor cannot or will not use...a whole group of people [who] is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination” (Young 53). Her third outlined face of oppression, “powerlessness,” demonstrates the extent to which, as mentioned in the first face of oppression, for some, “power is exercised without their exercising it; the powerless are situated so that they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them” (Young 56). The fourth face, “cultural imperialism,” “involves the universalization of a dominant group’s experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm” (Young 58-59) all the while burying the cultural identity of all who are not already living the majority experience. Lastly, Young defines the fifth face of oppression, “violence,” to be when “members of some groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or private property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person” (Young 61).

This last face illustrates how the oppressed may also live in constant fear for their physical well-being, past just the influences of their emotional distress.

### **An Objection to Young**

I will be taking a closer look into Young's account of structural oppression as it relates to her second face of oppression, marginalization. As previously mentioned, Young claims that due to the nature of structural oppression, one can be an oppressor without ever having intended to be an oppressor. I object to her assertion that being an oppressor can be an unintentional act, a result of the system, and advance that oppression can never be unintentional.

Marginals materialize in society in a multitude of capacities as a result of people possessing characteristics deemed undesirable by the majority including but not limited to those who are physically or mentally impaired, houseless, lower-income, elderly, or those of a minority religion, race, gender identity, culture, or ethnic background. They have no ownership over their own identity and are put into social groups without their control. This categorical separation of people allows for these marginals to be easily identified, restricted from access to better opportunities and resources, and limited in their participation in certain aspects of greater society, as another form of domination. An example of a marginalized social group in the United States is the Native American and Indigenous population.

The Native American and Indigenous experience in the United States today intersects multiple faces of oppression as defined by Iris Young; however, I will primarily be focusing on marginalization for this analysis of Young's claim. Native American people have been the victims of centuries of brutal maltreatment by European settlers and their descendants. This is especially true regarding the 1800s when people native to the land that is now known as the "United States" were forcefully removed from their land territories and corralled into "specially

designated Indian territories” by the US federal government (History.com). The land in which the Native American people maintained was deemed favorable for farming cotton and the white settlers did what was necessary to resolve their “indian problem.” In the process, the reservation system was established under the Indian Appropriations Act which outlawed indigenous people from leaving their reservation without permission being granted from the US government:

“starvation was common, and living in close quarters hastened the spread of diseases brought by white settlers” (History.com). The relationship of the reservation inhabitants and the government has evolved over time, but has ultimately led to what we are familiar today to be a relationship in which the American government knows much of their suffering and lack of resource, but does little to attend to their social and financial needs: “this study reveals that federal funding directed to Native Americans through programs at these agencies has not been sufficient to address the basic and very urgent needs of indigenous peoples. Among the myriad unmet needs are: health care, education, public safety, housing, and rural development...immediate requirements for increased funding are: infrastructure development, without which tribal governments cannot properly deliver services; tribal courts, which preserve order in tribal communities, provide for restitution of wrongs, and lend strength and validity to other tribal institutions; and tribal priority allocations, which permit tribes to pursue their own priorities and allow tribal governments to respond to the needs of their citizens” (U.S Commission on Civil Rights 4).

In this case study of marginalization, I argue that this oppression can not be considered unintentional. Although Young might contend that the US federal government is just a institutional component of society thus making their oppressive behaviors structural, it would be a mistake to disregard their absolute sovereignty over the decisions that directly created this case of Native American domination and marginalization as purely consequences of “business as

usual.” This is not an overlooked, unanticipated byproduct of the everyday function of society, but the consequence of unjust legislative power and executive decision, a direct effect of “a few people’s decisions and policies,” to quote Young herself. This is intentional isolation of a social group by the US government that is denied participation in society and deprived of the resources needed to survive. I argue that it would be unjust to absolve all of the individual's active in the execute, legislative, and judicial branches of their hand in oppressing native peoples from the time the oppression first began to today where the oppression continues. The argument could even be made that it is not just to absolve the American citizens who elected the individuals to their positions of government of their indirect yet complicit role in the historical and ensuing oppression. Oppression can never be unintentional, because alike the case of indigenous people, there has to be a group of people who are complicit in its pursuit whether that be the bystanders who allow it to persist or the group directly responsible for its inception originally.

My objection to Young alters the entirety of her analysis of oppression from a structural and systematic point of view. Young’s notion that oppression is structural and unconscious rests on her claim that “the system character of oppression implies that an oppressed group need not have a correlate oppressing group” (Young 41); consequently, her rebuttal to my objection would likely remain that the individuals in government can not be held responsible for the oppression that has occurred. It was never their intention to expel the Native American people from greater society and subject them to a life devoid of education, public health, and resource infrastructure. In response to my argument, Young may reinforce her point that “the conscious actions of many individuals daily contribute to maintaining and reproducing oppression, but those people are usually simply doing their jobs or living their lives, and do not understand themselves as agents of oppression” (Young 41- 42). In which I would respond that it was within the power and

jurisdiction of the elected officials in government to have not forced the native people off of their land and into reservations that do not have the resources to function removed from society.

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