Building New Communities

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“Justice requires that all be able to express their needs.” (Young 1990, 34)

How can we attain a more just world? I present an approach that integrates changes at the institutional, collective, and personal levels based on a feminist vision corresponding to Iris Marion Young’s ideal of justice. Young (1990; 1989) extends the traditional distributional justice paradigm through a central idea: People are in relation to each other. These interrelationships also form the foundation of her theory of global justice (2006). I incorporate these facets into a picture of social justice that allows us to evaluate local and global contexts. I identify four elements that ensure social justice. Culled from the work of several philosophers, I include tools that can help us incorporate these elements into our communities – at the institutional and collective levels – to reach Young’s ideal thus counteracting our current unjust realities, which I sketch briefly. Transformation happens only if we combine the elements synthesized from philosophers’ work, which address systemic changes, with their application in our personal lives. There is evidence that the status quo is deeply embedded in our social selves often manifested through stereotypes. While reshaping interactions seems to imply changes on the personal level, none of the philosophers call for them outright. Thus, I outline some ways of applying the philosophical tools presented to our lives to achieve individual transformation.

Many political philosophers envision a more just society. They are often criticized for failing to provide a roadmap of how to get from our current reality to their envisioned future

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1 This paper has greatly benefited from feedback by Simona Capisani and Shelley Wilcox.
Richard Wasserstrom (1977) suggests arguments for change in society require three perspectives: Current social realities, a normative vision, and means for achieving this vision. I follow his approach in this paper to allow us to get from “here to there” (Young 1995, 234).

1. An Ideal of Justice

John Rawls’ (1958) theory of justice is based on his analysis of the “original position” where people ignorant of the contexts of their lives outline rules to govern society. They agree, argues Rawls, that a fair distribution ensuring everyone receives an equal share of goods is required by justice within a society. The difference principle allows for exceptions if inequality advances the social position of the least advantaged. Rawls and his followers see an evaluation of the distributional pattern as sufficient for determining justice. Although not explicitly stated, justice is a matter of equality regarding material goods. Outside of the idealized position, however, the distribution of material goods is mired in injustice. In order to understand this injustice, Iris Marion Young advocates looking at the processes that produced and reproduce these patterns (Young 1990). She asserts that they reflect oppressive and dominating processes, which become visible only when we analyze the distributional pattern within the institutional context that produced it. This context exists because there are relationships between people: People interact. They are not just atomistic consumers and owners, as Rawls’ theory suggests, but also “doers and actors” (37).

The institutional context can be described by social structures, which govern enabling and constraining routines of interaction, reflect institutional rules, and ensure the availability of resources (Young 2006). They do not exist in the abstract but only between people arising out
of the process of interaction within a specific socio-historical background. Social structures co-evolve: They produce certain actions, which are governed by the norms of the structures, which are reproduced by these actions. The structures would not exist if it were not for the cultural and physical environment in which they developed. At the same time, the structures affect these environments.

Social structures bind people together not just in dyadic interactions but more broadly throughout society, even globally. Because of their social nature, the actions of individuals can accumulate creating patterns of collective actions. The collective results of these actions can have unintended consequences that call for actors to take responsibility. In dyadic situations taking responsibility is fairly straightforward. It is governed by what Young calls the liability model of responsibility (2006): An actor is directly tied to a harm, which can be shown to be a direct consequence of a voluntary action. A burglar intended to steal the painting and therefore is responsible for the act. However, actions within social structures are not directly tied to a single actor. The collective nature of actions diffuses the responsibility. The harm, the moral wrong, is the consequence of interactions within the processes. If we buy fair trade tea, we might not realize that we still perpetuate injustice (Besky 2010). Obviously, this could mean that we declare that nobody is responsible. The system did it. Young instead proposes a social connection model to clarify this shared responsibility (2006). Because we act within social structures, our actions connect us to everybody else involved in the process. If harm ensues anywhere along the process or is the end result of that process, everybody who participates in it bears responsibility for that harm, including people who are harmed by the process itself (123). Consequently, it is important to assess actors’ social positions within the process to
determine to what extent they can be expected to discharge their responsibility. People benefitting from the status quo are less likely to take responsibility for the collective results of their actions. This leads to situations of structural injustice, which perpetuate domination and oppression, which in turn uphold these social structures.

In sum, justice needs to be evaluated based on the distribution of material goods and the processes that recreate the patterns of these distributions, which are mired in oppression and domination. Without examining our social connections and discharging our responsibilities arising from them, we cannot build a just world.

2. Current Social Realities

We live in a world marred by injustice. Incomes are distributed with vast differentials – within countries, especially the United States, and internationally (Wilkinson & Pickett 2009). Cultural differences are not recognized as globalization moves to a homogenized culture based on the USAmerican consumer society (Pyles 2009). If it is acknowledged at all, oppression is not counteracted through representation of groups impacted by it. Programs, which might ensure such representation, are continuously attacked (Pizzigati 2010).

Movements that challenge the status quo in one area reproduce oppression in other areas (Christina 2010). For example, four white men, privileged by their class positions, represent the atheist movement, which challenges the influence and dominance of religion. Most of these men seem unaware of the social structures this perpetuates. Similarly, the permaculture movement, which advocates food production and living arrangements that do

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2 Because there are more countries in the Americas than the United States, I prefer to use “USAmerican” when referencing the United States.

3 Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett are university professors. Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris are accomplished journalists.
not rely on the availability of cheap non-renewable energy, has mostly male spokespeople\(^4\).
The few women involved in the US branch are highly educated\(^5\). US family law is gender-neutral, however, the social structures that influence families continue inequality between men and women (aside from the inequalities between married and unmarried people).

Young’s analysis of justice lets us express the underlying problem: There are social structures that govern our interactions, which perpetuate a system of oppression and domination. Amending those social structures – by making family law gender-neutral, for example – does not change the underlying processes. These band-aid approaches might lessen the effects of injustice but they do not overcome it. For that, a paradigm shift is needed to a culture that embraces difference, uses and values diversity, and is truly democratic. The challenge is how to get from our unjust reality to a just future. Because our interactions are shaped by social structures, which are deeply embedded in and reinforced by our daily lives, I suggest that we need to develop methods that change them. Changing these social structures, which reflect our interactions with each other, can happen by designing different ways of living, new communal lives. Given the band-aid approaches of the past this might seem idealistic.
And it might be. However, several philosophers – Young, David Schlosberg (2007), Judy Whipps (2004), and Judith Green (2006) – have outlined elements that are necessary for promoting this shift. I use their work to develop a vision of communal interactions that might bring us closer to a society where everybody’s needs are met (Young 1990, 34).

\(^4\) Bill Mollison and David Holmgren are the two white males who started permaculture in Australia.
\(^5\) Starhawk has a MA in psychology and Penny Livingston-Stark is trained in land management (her bio is a bit sparse on formal training credentials).
3. A Vision of a Justice Promoting Community

According to Iris Marion Young, “social justice means the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression” (Young 1990, 15). The realities outlined in the previous section indicate the desperate need for such elimination. There are four interrelated elements that can help us establish social justice: Just distribution; recognition, including overcoming our aversions to certain body types and valuing difference; representation; participation or deliberate democracy. Two of these elements – representation and participation – provide crucial checks and balances that ensure the continuation of justice and prevent the development of injustice. All are important for overcoming domination and oppression. After describing each element in more detail, I provide some specific tools that can help us implement them. Although I separate them, they are interrelated. As Green (2006) stresses, for example, deliberate democracy remains incomplete without valuing pluralism. Each tool also furthers other elements than the one I ascribe it to.

The first step to a just society, as Rawls rightly recognized, is the fair distribution of material goods, especially income and wealth. The simplest tools available are taxes that redistribute money from the wealthier to the less well off. A tax system needs to be developed within the context of representation and participation to ensure that wealthier taxpayers cannot buy their way out of their responsibilities, as they currently do.

Valuing difference, which starts with recognition, reflects “heterogeneity without assimilation” (Young 1995) and “unity without uniformity” (Schlosberg 2007). It requires a process “open to difference and yet focused on making connections across that difference” (Schlosberg 2007, 182). It thrives through our realization that we are interdependent with
others. Our identities are a result of this interdependency as well as our interactions with those who are different than we are (Schlosberg 2007). Valuing difference means that we recognize that we might share problems and interests but that our final ends might be different (Young 1990). We do not strive to transcend difference but rather value and celebrate it.

There are multiple tools for learning to value difference, most require viewing it not as something negative or threatening but rather as something positive, something that can enrich our lives. In her sketch of the ideal city, Young (1990) offers several virtues that achieve this. Embracing the idea of difference as something erotic is most important (239-40). Difference challenges us in a titillating way to go beyond our comfort zone to embrace the adventure of absorbing different cultures, different ways of living. Viewing difference as erotic opens us to learning, to novel experiences, and leads to mutual recognition as beings who have different ways of expressing ourselves. The variety difference can provide us supports a related virtue. Instead of creating zones in our cities that are restricted to businesses and others to residences, multi-functional streets create a sense of neighborhood where people want to hang out and mingle. To avoid gentrification, the participation of diverse groups is important, which is facilitated by the third virtue of Young’s ideal city. Differentiation without exclusion acknowledges that people form affinity groups and use group membership for self-identity. In the ideal city, this happens without boundaries, physical or otherwise. All of us have multiple identities, affirmed by groups that “overlap and intermingle” (239).

Even if we have common goals, we might understand our goals differently. We might, for example, have varying definitions of justice. Instead of demanding that we find a definition that all agree on, we can embrace the multitude (Schlosberg 2007). This helps us develop
tolerance, which in turn enables plurality as an element of justice. It can also facilitate coalition building because we can recognize various ways of defining a (seemingly) common goal, like social justice. We can extend this tool to other areas by accepting that there are many valid ways we define values important to us.

We can develop respect for others’ points of view – using a tool Schlosberg calls “agnostic respect” (182). It emerges out of our realization that we are interconnected with others, including those different from us (Green 2006, 313) and can be honed through engagement (Schlosberg 2007). Engagement reflects a willingness to listen to people who might have other, even opposing, beliefs (181). It stems from the appreciation that other positions can add to our understanding of the larger picture. We can practice engagement by “getting others to understand [our] experience and framework, and vice versa” (183). This reveals “a critical pluralism based in more thorough recognition and mutual engagement” (183). Collective actions, which might involve the pursuit of a common interest, such as environmental justice, allow us to implement engagement. Through them, we can discharge our responsibilities that we acquired through our social connections (Young 2006).

Conflict might be a surprising tool, yet, it is bound to arise therefore it is important to use rather than evade it (Schlosberg 2007). It can help us practice valuing difference by tolerating that others might not agree with our views, our definitions, or even our goals. Valuing diversity requires compromise and mediation, which become necessary when conflict arises ( Whipps 2004, 128).

Pluralism itself can be a tool when recognizing its importance in philosophical epistemology, as feminist pragmatists suggest (Whipps 2004). Knowing is a “social endeavor”
that cannot be obtained unless we “include previously-excluded voices” (129). It depends on diverse people’s experience. We cannot obtain knowledge if we do not reach out to people different from us by connecting with them through telling our “past history and experiences” (127). Knowledge remains conditional since we might find a person whose experience contradicts what we had assumed as true.

Recognition includes overcoming aversions to body types that have been culturally declared less desirable, not valuable, or even threatening (Young 1990). These aversions reflect deep-seated stereotypes that we need to learn to question (Green 2006). We need tools for “challenging [our] own” discourse, which might reflect assumptions, stereotypes, or prejudices that we have developed by uncritically absorbing the culture around us (309). These tools can be based on recognizing the disliked as human with experiences they tell us to enrich our knowledge. Only with the representation and participation of those faced with the oppression of cultural imperialism can we generate adequate tools to counteract aversions (Young 1990).

As Whipps points out, pluralism makes democracy possible if the voices of the oppressed are heard. It is necessary for “authentic, representative, and useful” decisions (129). Decision-making benefits from two other elements for elimination of oppression and domination: Representation and participation. Representation ensures that oppressed groups are active in the decision-making process and have veto-powers over decisions that directly impact them (Young 1989). Participation enables all to actively deliberate in a democracy. This includes removing barriers to participation, such as offering childcare and welcoming ways of contemplating that are not defined by rational discourse, such as rhetoric or storytelling, thus
reflecting diversity (Whipps 2004, 307). The deliberative process leads to “fullest truths, the most substantively just policies, and the most respectful social relations” (Green 2006, 313).

A fourth virtue of Young’s ideal city enables recognition and participation: The existence of public spaces and forums (Young 1990, 240-1). These public spaces allow for the exchange of ideas, experiences, histories, and general witnessing of each other. They are accessible to everyone. Open public spaces can facilitate our self-expression, which encourages our participation in democracy (Whipps 2004).

Recognition and participation might require the intervention of a governing body that ensures that all oppressed groups’ voices are heard. A large regional government where representatives of all groups would come together can provide that role. It assures the just distribution of services and resources. It upholds justice by utilizing a “modified Millian test” (Young 1990, 250-1), which provides autonomy over a decision only if there is no harm to others, capabilities of others are not inhibited, and it does not compel others to act or create the conditions for such actions. Given how interdependent we are, such grants of autonomy will be a fairly rare occurrence.

Communication and the practice of engagement are also critical for representation and participation: If we do not connect with others across difference, the process of deliberate democracy breaks down (Schlosberg 2007). This mutual listening as an acknowledgement of our interdependence develops trust, which “creates the foundation for joint mediation, decision-making, and progress” (Whipps 2004, 124). Listening to each other also creates community through the recognition of our interrelationships and our sharing of diverse experiences.
4. Change Begins with the Self

Some philosophers argue for personal duties around some of the elements presented in the previous section. I expand on their work to argue that we, as individuals, have a duty to incorporate all elements in our lives and sketch ways for doing that.

Peter Singer (1972) postulates that we have a moral duty to redistribute our income based on the intuitive wish to prevent bad things from happening; an intuition moral reasoning expands globally. At minimum, we should share our money with people who earn less, enacting a personal redistribution long before the tax structure is adjusted.

Jane Addams (1902) argues that our modern world is built on social interactions requiring a social moral code. It is imperative, she writes, that this social morality is grounded in the experience of as many people as possible because only through knowledge of other’s lives can we develop morally without artificially limiting the “scope of our ethics” (9-10). Without diversity, our morality is incomplete. Thus, we can seek out diversity informally without the institutions that encourage pluralism. We can talk to others who have different opinions from ours, come from a different class or nation, or are of a different race or gender.

As a personal way to celebrate difference, we can explore neighborhoods with different ethnic makeup, trying out foods that we thought would not taste good. Maybe we will discover new favorites. We can participate in celebrations of other cultures – maybe learn a new dance or a new language. We can become aware of bodies that trigger our aversions – including our own – and act against it.

Justice, though, requires more than distribution and recognition. To transform oppression and domination, participation and representation are also necessary. Because
social structures develop out of our interactions, we have an obligation to demand all participate and are represented. We can get involved in our neighborhood assembly and ask for representation and participation by people from all groups in our neighborhood.

Recognizing that even the homeless person down the street is part of our community, we ask that she can join the assembly (Waldron 2000). Thus, through changing ourselves, we can change our environment. If we want a just society, it is therefore our duty to start practicing all four elements by incorporating them into our lives. Without our individual efforts, justice is not possible at the collective or institutional levels.

5. A Roadmap to A Just World

To get from “here to there” (Young 1995, 234) – the ubiquitous roadmap – we can leverage two keys for change: At the individual level, the development of our social self and, at the collective level, learning through doing. The social self emerges out of a child’s exposure to the predominant culture learning the social structures so crucially important in Young’s justice model (Green 2006, 309). It contrasts itself with a “generalized other.” We can challenge the social structures by experiencing other ways of living through exposure to diverse generalized others. This does not happen automatically, though, since the status quo is powerful.

Deliberate contact needs to form an important educational tool for enabling democracy, which requires an interactive self-development incorporating generalized others. It is facilitated by the experience provided to us by global connections such as the internet (308). Through it a worldwide exchange of ideas – of generalized others – is made possible. This exposure is crucial for the development of “critical and imaginative capacities,” which allow us to appreciate others (310).
By actively exposing ourselves to the four elements for a just society, we redevelop our social self. This in turn will impact how we interact with others connecting the individual to the collective. Our friends might become interested in the new foods we discovered. Or they might feel comfortable sharing their heritage. Learning about other cultures makes it more difficult not to recognize the people who live these cultures. We start demanding their participation because we learned to value their points of view. By realizing that the bodies we avoided are not as threatening as we feared, we sow the seeds for overcoming cultural imperialism.

The second key to social change comes from experience. We can learn through doing. Education is a basic building block for deliberate democracy (Green 2006). Moreover, Green advocates that we continue learning deliberation through practice. This experiential education is, again, a collective action in which we reach out to others “to act out a reflectively preferable form of life” (310). The basic units of participatory democracy in Young’s ideal city are the neighborhood assemblies. These assemblies roll up to the regional government thereby avoiding the potential power grab of state and national governments. In addition, these neighborhood assemblies provide a forum where we can exercise the processes that reproduce patterns of justice thus strengthening democracy and preventing the reemergence of oppression and domination (Young 1990, 252). This connects the collective level to the institutional.

6. Empirical Validation of the Vision

It can be difficult to implement theoretical ideas in our lives whether in our communities or individually. Evidence of success can help overcome these difficulties. We are fairly familiar
with—albeit imperfect—redistribution through taxes. In this section, I briefly present examples of the less practiced elements in action.

Participation and representation empowered residents of the Rogers Park neighborhood in Chicago, Illinois (Simpson 2010). Alderman Joe Moore wanted input from the community he represents on how to spend $1.3 million in city funds6. Thus, he called for a “date with democracy,” a widely publicized meeting that kicked off committees—formed and staffed by residents. The committees prepared proposals for a community forum where everybody living in the area could contribute their feedback. A vote by the entire community on the projects followed.

J. Stephen Lansing describes an ancient system to manage the rice fields on the island Bali, which incorporates representation, participation, and valuing difference (Long Now 2006). It adds democracy to a society that is organized very hierarchically with deference to priests and a caste system (Lansing 2006). All farmers who share the same water source are part of a subak or village forum. In the subaks, the caste system is set aside (Long Now 2006, 10:38). Coordination between upstream and downstream subaks is crucial since the downstream villages are dependent on the water supply from villages upstream. To ensure that the downstream villages get the water they need, the region, consisting of the villages along the stream, is managed by someone from a downstream village (Bayuk 2006).

An example of a project that values difference and overcomes aversions to certain bodies comes from Portland, Oregon. To counteract urban problems, including drug use and crime, community members of a neighborhood undertook an intersection repair project (City

6 Further information on this process can be found at http://www.ward49.com/participatory-budgeting/)
Repair 2006, 30-1). A nine-month long project of redesigning an intersection to transform it into a communal space culminated in a celebration, which included housed and homeless neighbors.

At bottom, to ensure social justice, to ensure that all of our needs are met, we need new communities, communities that incorporate all four elements outlined in this paper – just distribution, valuing difference, representation, and participation – by using some or all of the associated tools. Implementing changes into our own lives enables the development of these new communities. Yet, transformation of society can only happen through an active interplay of personal, collective, and institutional change. We are obligated to work toward this transformation because of our social connections that tie us to existing injustices.
References


