

# Justice and the Politics of Identity

## *Becoming and Structure in Iris Young*

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► **Abstract:** In this article I recuperate a structure-oriented account of a politics of becoming from the work of Iris Young, one that rejects identity politics to focus instead on redressing structural injustice. Young offers a theorization of democracy that at once acknowledges our inner multiplicity and our individual capacity to shape our identity, and views equality and inclusion as important political goals that require eliminating structural injustice. For Young, fully embracing the multiplicity and fluidity of groups entails a shift away from conceptualizing groups in terms of identity, toward viewing groups as structural positions. Emancipation thus cannot be achieved through including marginalized identities (e.g., through group-based representation) but only through attention to how particular social positions become the site of structural advantage or disadvantage.

► **Keywords:** becoming, identity politics, Iris Young, justice, structure

Whether scholars trace the concept of “becoming” to Stuart Hall ([1990] 2021), to William Connolly (1996), or further back to Friedrich Nietzsche ([1882] 1974), they associate becoming with identity. In contrast to “being” (which is static and fixed), “becoming” expresses a view of identity as changing, multiplicitous, and self-created. In the 1990s, Hall and Connolly used the language of becoming to articulate anti-essentialist conceptions of collective identity emergent in social movements, as an alternative to essentialist identity politics. More recently, Hans Asenbaum (2023) has criticized many approaches to “the politics of becoming” for their stress on collective identity, and called for more attention to individual self-creation. Regardless of the emphasis placed on the collective or the individual, the politics of becoming directs focus to identity.

In this article, I turn to Iris Young to challenge this identity orientation in the literature on becoming. As I will detail, while Young in her early years was sympathetic to elements of identity politics, she moved increasingly away from centering her political theory on identity, in favor of calling for a focus on structural injustice. I find in her work a theory



sensitive to identity as becoming that leads away from a politics of becoming oriented around identity to one oriented around structure. My objective is thus to challenge the Nietzschean interpretations of becoming that focus on identity as the site of becoming. This starting point leads theorists of becoming to stress political projects focused on identity over structure, even when they are sensitive to how structures constrain and produce identities.

With Young as my ally, I advocate a different approach to becoming: a Beauvoirian one that emphasizes that becoming is not an unfettered process of Nietzschean self-creation. Rather, following Simone de Beauvoir ([1952] 1989), I submit that to understand how one becomes (a woman), one must critically examine the material, embodied, psychic, and normative conditions in which people find themselves situated (as women), regardless of how they self-identify. These manifold structures that inhibit individual freedom and self-creation should be the focus of any emancipatory politics of becoming.

First, I trace how Young shifted away from conceptualizing groups as arising from shared identity toward viewing them as resulting from structure. Next, I show how Young's understanding of identity as a process of becoming informs her distinctive theory of representation. In conclusion, I argue that we should take inspiration from Young to reject a politics of becoming grounded in Nietzschean self-creation and look instead to dismantle unjust structures that inhibit our capacity to become.

## From Identity to Structure

Young came of age in the 1970s, when “identity politics” was in the ascendant on the progressive left in the United States. Social movements from Black Power to gay liberation to the disability movement were organized by and for groups of people who (it was presumed) shared a common identity. These movements nonetheless quickly generated internal critiques: that not all Black, gay, or disabled persons shared common attributes; that these identities were not mutually exclusive but overlapped such that the same person could be Black, gay, and disabled; and that because of the interactions of multiple group identities, members of any one group could not be said to share much if anything in common (Young 2000: 87). In the introduction to her most famous book, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (hereafter *Justice*), Young notes that it was the experience of such “discussions in the women’s movement of the importance and difficulty of acknowledging differences of class, race, sexuality, age, ability, and culture among women” (1990a: 13) that shaped her relationship

to identity politics. Indeed, it is telling that the book's title proclaims it is about the politics of difference rather than identity: already by 1990, Young had begun to shift from thinking of groups as defined by an identity shared by all members to thinking of groups as defined by structural positioning, irrespective of how individual group members identify.

Nonetheless, traces persist in *Justice* of Young's earlier influence by identity politics. These traces shape how some readers encounter the book: as a defense of group-based rights and representation (Phillips 1995: 156) that is prone to essentialism (Asenbaum 2023: 87). Young characterizes groups in *Justice* as "defined not primarily by a set of shared attributes, but by a sense of identity" (1990a: 44; cf. 172). A group, she argues, differs from a mere aggregate because group members actively identify with and feel affinity for the group (43). And when groups have been subject to the particular form of oppression she terms cultural imperialism – in which "the oppressed group's own experience and interpretation of social life find little expression that touches the dominant culture, while that same culture imposes on the oppressed group its experience and interpretation of social life" (60) – she defends the positive assertion of the group's distinctive identity, values, and culture (166–167). Since members of oppressed groups have internalized the values of the dominant culture, she argues, "separate organization is probably necessary ... to discover and reinforce the positivity of their specific experience" (167). In these moments, Young appears to embrace separatist identity politics: the view that emancipation requires creating separate collectives composed only of those who share an identity. Indeed, Young frequently illustrates her argument with references to consciousness-raising techniques feminists used to identify and unlearn toxic patriarchal messaging by gathering in small, women-only groups to discuss their experiences (see Ferguson 2009, 2022).

In *Justice*, Young also appears to embrace representative identity politics: the view that oppressed groups require allocation of seats in decision-making bodies to guarantee that their voices will be heard. She writes, "A democratic public should provide mechanisms for the effective recognition and representation of the distinct voices and perspectives of those of its constituent groups that are oppressed or disadvantaged" (1990a: 184). While she is not specific about what these mechanisms should be, Young seems to defend something like the integration of separatist identity politics into representative democracy: separate, identity-based groups in civil society would be represented as distinct constituencies in decision-making institutions, where they would provide "group analysis and group generation of policy proposals" as well as exercise "group veto power regarding specific policies that affect a group directly" (184).

Although Young resists offering specific recommendations for institutionalizing group-based representation, she frequently references the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) as one inspiration (1990b: 10). NWSA has a structure whereby the chairs of certain caucuses (currently, the Women of Color Caucus and the Lesbian Caucus) sit on the Governing Council to ensure the representation of their groups' voices in decision-making (NWSA 2022).

Even though Young at times in *Justice* seems to embrace the idea that identity-based groups have unique values, cultures, and voices that deserve institutionalization in political decision-making, she also offers a view of groups that is in direct tension with the essentialism of identity politics and that parallels Hall's and Connolly's anti-essentialist theories of collective identity as becoming. Groups, she repeatedly notes, are differentiated, or relational; they "exist only in relation to other groups" (1990a: 46). They are the products of social practices through which people come to identify themselves and others as members of groups by differentiating one group from others. As products of social interactions, groups are historical (47) and changing (172); they have no fixed essence. What it means to be identified as a woman, Black, or a Black woman depends on one's specific historical and cultural context (47), and this can vary across the same society, or alter over a lifetime. Moreover, groupings are not mutually exclusive: every individual belongs to multiple groups. Consequently, Young describes groups as "multiple, cross-cutting, fluid, and shifting" (48) – that is, as becoming. Any group formed along one axis of identity is thus internally heterogeneous (172–173). Members of a single group are therefore unlikely to share a single point of view that could be easily represented in democratic decision-making through reserved seats for group members.

Indeed, a recurring (if underappreciated) theme in her democratic theorizing is Young's rejection not just of identity politics but of what she terms "the logic of identity" (drawing on Theodor Adorno). The logic of identity is a tendency in Western thinking to "reduce everything to one first principle" (98). This logic underlies group-based oppression: one group is treated as normative (men, the abled, heterosexuals, whites), and all others as deviant. "Difference thus becomes a hierarchical opposition" (102). Inasmuch as identity politics relies on an essentialist group identity that reduces group identity to a set of presumed shared attributes, Young should reject it as a manifestation of the logic of identity (cf. 229ff.).

Young associates Adorno's critique of the logic of identity with Jacques Derrida's ([1967] 2016) critique of the metaphysics of presence, specifically the idea that Western thought presumes the transparency of meaning. Young extends this Derridean analysis to socially differentiated groups:

far from being united by a common interest or common good (which would enable us to communicate our meaning clearly), individuals view matters from irreducibly different perspectives. This means that people cannot completely understand one another, “especially when class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and age define different social locations, one subject cannot fully empathize with another in a different social location, adopt her point of view” (1990a: 105). She sees this as a limit not just on the ability of groups to understand one another but also on the ability of individuals to communicate meaning: “Other persons never see the world from my perspective, and in witnessing the other’s objective grasp of my body, actions, and words, I am always faced with an experience of myself different from the one I have” (231). To complicate matters even further, she argues that subjects are not even transparent to themselves, so “I cannot understand others as they understand themselves, because they do not completely understand themselves. Indeed, because the meanings and desires they express may outrun their own awareness or intention, I may understand their words or actions more fully than they” (232). Our inability to fully know our own selves, to put ourselves in other people’s shoes, and to successfully communicate our meaning to others mitigates against the presumption of representative identity politics: that members of the same group share the same, distinctive perspective that ought to be represented in political institutions.

*Justice* does not resolve this tension between Young’s seeming embrace of some forms of identity politics and her simultaneous rejection of a cohesive, knowable, and communicable collective identity that could undergird group-based representation, yet in subsequent works, Young moves decidedly away from identity toward social structure as the defining characteristic of groups. She does this first in “Gender as Seriality,” an essay preoccupied with the manifestation of this same tension within feminist theory debates over the category of women. Feminism, she argues, must be able to speak of women as a “collective without identifying common attributes that all women have or implying that all women have a common identity” ([1994] 1997: 13). She resolves the tension by distinguishing between “social groups” with which individuals actively identify, and “series,” collectives defined by structural positioning, regardless of how those positioned in the series identify. Feminists constitute an affinity group based in active identification; however, women are a series. “Women” names not an identity group but a shifting collection of all persons who find themselves (at least some of the time) positioned as women by larger structures. As Young puts it, “Gender ... is a vast, multifaceted, layered, complex, and overlapping set of structures and objects” (28). The structures that position some people as women include

bodies, compulsory heterosexuality, pronouns, “verbal and visual representations,” clothing, cosmetics, gendered furniture and spaces, and a sexual division of labor (28–29). Feminism is not a form of identity politics grounded in a common identity shared by all women. Rather, it is the emancipatory political project that aims to address structural injustices affecting those who are positioned as women, regardless of how they identify themselves.

In *Inclusion and Democracy* (hereafter *Inclusion*), Young (2000) employs this distinction between identity politics and a politics oriented toward structural justice to develop and clarify the democratic theory she had articulated in *Justice*. She makes three important claims that help her complete the shift from identity to structure. First, she makes the empirical claim that social justice movements are primarily concerned with issues of structural justice, and only secondarily (if at all) concerned with issues that might be more appropriately labeled as “identity politics” (105–107). As a critical theorist, Young’s “aim is to express rigorously and reflectively some of the claims about justice and injustice implicitly in the politics of these movements” (1990a: 7). Insofar as the claims made by these social movements themselves “are not claims to the recognition of identity as such, but rather claims for fairness, equal opportunity, and political inclusion” (2000: 107), her own theorizing must reflect this emphasis on structural injustice.

Second, she claims that groups are structural: they are collections of people who occupy similar structural social positions. Young calls for theorists to “disengage social group difference from a logic of identity” (82): group difference is not a function of fixed attributes shared by group members. Rather, she clarifies her claim that difference is relational: “Any group consists in a collective of individuals who stand in determinate relations with one another because of the actions and interactions of both those associated with the group and those outside or at the margins of the group” (89). Groups are characterized not by shared identity but by the social relations group members have with others. A person is a woman, for example, not because she possesses certain attributes or identifies as a woman but because of how others (themselves positioned as women or men) relate to her, how she is positioned in a social field in relation to others. Structural positions are relatively stable but not permanently fixed; they “exist only in the action and interaction of persons; they exist not as states, but as processes” (95). Groups – or rather *social* groups, as Young insists on calling them in *Inclusion* – are not grounded in a shared identity but are the result of sedimented social practices (i.e., structures) that differentiate group members from non-members (96).

Third, she argues that it is inappropriate to attribute identity to social groups at all. Groups do not have identity; only individuals do. This

distinction allows her to make sense of why people positioned as women have different relationships to this positioning: “Some women, for example, affirm norms of femininity and internalize them; others resist evaluations of their actions and dispositions in such terms” (101). The social fact that one is positioned as a woman does not determine one’s own relationship to this positioning: that is a matter of individual agency (101–102). Moreover, even two people who are similarly positioned in one respect (say, by sexuality) will not experience that positioning in the same way, because people are always also positioned in multiple ways (by race, gender, age, ability, and so forth).

By detaching identity from group membership, Young embraces a kind of identity as becoming, the capacity of individuals to develop unique identities in relationship to the social practices that position them in various ways: “a person’s identity is her own, formed in active relation to social positions, among other things, rather than constituted by them. Individual subjects make their own identities, but not under conditions they choose” (99). While we find ourselves positioned in various ways in a social world, this positioning shapes but does not determine how as individuals we self-identify and relate to the norms and practices that position us. People can and do seek to shift the norms and practices of our social worlds: feminists seek to loosen normative expectations of proper femininity; nonbinary activists seek to challenge practices that position us as either men or women. Young thus can fully embrace individual agency in self-making and self-transformation while also remaining committed to an emancipatory political vision of eliminating group-based structural injustice. That is, she offers her own vision of becoming that pairs an account of individuals as self-creating with a politics of structural transformation.

## Democratic Representation of Structural Groups

We can now see how in *Inclusion* Young rejects descriptive representation, in which representatives are supposed to mirror the demographic characteristics of their constituents. Advocates of identity-based group representation often implicitly adopt a view of what Young terms “representation as substitution or identification” (123): since the representative and the constituency are members of the same group, they are presumed to share an identity, and therefore to be interchangeable with one another. Critics point out that members of the same group are not in fact alike and in agreement, and therefore cannot be said to be represented by a member of their group (e.g., Phillips 1995: 157). Yet Young notes this critical

position is also beholden to the logic of identity and the metaphysics of presence it seems to reject (2000: 125–126): when critics claim that group representation schemes inevitably fail to be representative, they are relying on the view that representation only occurs when representatives and constituents are so alike as to be substitutable for one another.

Drawing on Derrida’s concept of *différance*, Young argues for an alternative conceptualization of “representation as a *differentiated relationship* among political actors engaged in a process extending over space and time” (123). The representative and the constituents can never be identical or substitute for one another: there is a spatial gap between them as distinct individuals who do not occupy the same social position (or physical body), and a temporal gap in their relationship as representatives and constituents. Constituents and representatives engage in a back-and-forth of authorization and accountability: constituents authorize representatives to act; then representatives take action; then constituents then hold representatives accountable for their actions; and then representatives give reasons to justify their actions to their constituents (132–133). Democratic representation is thus an ongoing relationship that requires active democratic participation on the part of constituents, who must be engaged politically in order to articulate their views and hold representatives to account for considering their voices (129). Even when representatives act as their constituents wish, there is a temporal gap between the moment of constituent authorization and the moment of representative action: they are never simply identical. Because of this ongoing interaction, we could say that representatives and constituents are always in a process of becoming (cf. 131).

Young complicates this account of representation by arguing that there are three different “modes of representation” that democracies should include: they should seek to represent interests, opinions, and perspectives (133). Interests are material (i.e., class-based) interests, represented by interest groups; opinions are values or beliefs, represented by political parties (134–136). Perspectives, however, are structural: these are the perspectives that people have on their social world by virtue of being positioned in multiple ways (136–141). It is highly unlikely that a single, elected representative will share with any one constituent the same interests, opinions, *and* perspectives; given the heterogeneity of legislative districts, it is implausible to imagine a representative who shares all these with all their constituents.

Accordingly, Young argues for *pluralizing* representation. Instead of expecting representatives to be identical with their constituents, we should seek to have many different representatives across a democratic system, any one of whom might share some of a constituent’s interests,



opinions, or perspectives. Representatives must therefore be pluralized across a legislative body, such that a constituent's perspective might not be reflected in the representative she elects but perhaps in other representatives elected by others. The sites of representation, too, must be pluralized: representation occurs in legislative bodies at different levels of government, across branches of government, with elected and appointed representatives, and beyond government in economic and social institutions as well. The *différance* of the representative relationship means that an individual cannot expect any one representative to be identical with themselves. Young thus encourages us to aim for inclusive representation in the aggregate, over plural relationships of representation (143).

Young does continue to advocate for the inclusion of groups through representation, but not for the same reasons as before. In *Justice*, she believed group representation was necessary for groups to express their distinctive values and culture. In *Inclusion*, she has abandoned the view that separate identity-based bodies should be organized to articulate such values and operate institutionally to hold group representatives to account (as on the NWSA model). Instead, she shifts to the view that groups have distinctive perspectives to add to democratic decision-making because of their positioning in social structures. Groups' structural perspectives give them knowledge about the social world that is a political resource for democracy. The knowledge people have by virtue of their group position is

(1) an understanding of their position, and how it stands in relation to other positions; (2) a social map of other salient positions, how they are defined, and the relation in which they stand to this position; (3) a point of view on the history of society; (4) an interpretation of how the relations and processes of the whole society operate, especially as they affect one's own positions; (5) a position-specific experience and point of view on the natural and physical environment. (117)

For example, a person who moves in a wheelchair has knowledge of the limits on her mobility posed by a lack of ramps and curb cuts, and a physical environment designed with the able-bodied in mind (cf. 117). Yet even when it comes to perspectives, Young urges pluralization: the inclusion of one person who occupies a particular perspective is never sufficient because members of a structural group are themselves heterogeneous. "The idea of perspective is meant to capture that sensibility of group-positioned experience without specifying unified content to what the perceptive sees" (138–139). Consequently, no one woman can represent the perspective of all women; instead, we should pluralize the representatives of a single perspective through "a small committee of women ... [which] can contain some of the perspectival differences that cross the

group, as well as the differences in individual experience, skill, and judgment that can better enable the committee to analyse social situations from the gendered perspective of women and express this perspective to a wider public” (148). Young thereby makes group representation compatible with an understanding of group positioning as multiple *and* identity as individual self-making: by pluralizing representation, Young can at once call for inclusion of group perspectives while refusing to presume the internal homogeneity of any group.

## Toward a Structure-Oriented Politics of Becoming

I have argued that Young offers a kind of politics of becoming, insofar as her work (particularly her later work) is grounded in a conception of individual identity as multiplicitous and shifting, as not fully known or transparent to self but also as (at least in part) the product of the self’s capacity for agency and self-creation. This view of individual identity as becoming ultimately leads Young to reject identity politics in favor of what I call a structure-oriented politics of becoming: a democratic politics that aims at structural justice, carried out by individuals whose identities are always in flux. In conclusion, I offer my thoughts as to why this structure orientation is important for any politics of becoming, why we should be more Beauvoirian and less Nietzschean.

First, without a clear account of how people find themselves always already positioned within structures (understood in Young’s capacious sense as including material, embodied, and normative structures), a politics of becoming risks sliding into an unrealistic celebration of unfettered voluntarism. This is manifested in some queer radical appropriations of Judith Butler’s concept of performativity that mistake the idea that gender is performed for the freedom to perform gender without constraint. If gender is socially constructed, the logic goes, then I can construct my own version of gender completely untethered from all social norms. Roger Lancaster (2019) refers to this idea of living beyond all norms as a “fantasy version of gay life ... [of] a pure and terrifying unassimilable abjection” that only has “appeal for academics, who are often relatively well-off at elite universities, who have the leisure to pose and play at abjection.” As Butler (1988) argues, individuals can only legibly play with performing gender by playing off already existing norms of gender. It is our capacity to invent new ways of acting *within* current social constraints that is at the heart of emancipatory politics, or as Young puts it, “that individual persons freely act in relation to social group positioning makes the possibility of collective action to transform those social relations possible”

(2000, 102). A politics of becoming untethered to an account of structure promises an unrealistic radical freedom to self-invent.

Second, without an intentional focus on identifying and redressing structural injustices, a politics of becoming risks trivializing or rendering invisible the forms of oppression that affect people not as self-created individuals but as subjects positioned within social structures. Consider ways in which people may be positioned by physical disability, say, or race—external positioning that occurs independently of self-creation. The person who moves in a wheelchair cannot transform away the physical barriers to their movement. The individual perceived as Black in an encounter with police cannot simply reason with an officer that that is not how they understand their identity. A politics of becoming that is not deeply informed by a theory of structure is ill-prepared to emancipate individuals and transform society.

Without a robust understanding of structural injustice, I contend that a politics of becoming is likely to devolve from an emancipatory democratic project into a celebration of self-making that is only truly available to those in positions of relative privilege. It may end up reinforcing rather than challenging existing structural inequities. I find in Young's work the inspiration for an alternative Beauvoirian politics of becoming that by shifting our focus from identity to structure aims to cultivate individual self-transformation *and* social transformation simultaneously.

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### ►► NOTE

1. Young's centering of the female body is problematic: it does not allow that intersexed, trans, nonbinary, and misgendered persons can also (sometimes) be positioned as women, subject to some subset of all the structures that serialize people as women.

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