

## Political Responsibility – my Responsibility, maybe not my Fault

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Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for justice*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

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*Responsibility for justice* is Iris Marion Young’s last book, published in 2011 by Oxford University Press. Martha C. Nussbaum signs the foreword, and we find out that the book represents a mostly completed manuscript which Marion Young did not have time to finish, as she left this world. Along its seven chapters, the book attempts to answer one central question: “how should we as individuals think about our own responsibility in relation to social injustice?” (Young 2011, 15). This question already clarifies the title, revealing the perspective inquired by Marion Young, namely the responsibility each person has for the social (in)justice of his/her community, of the world he/she lives in.

Such a theoretical project may sound, at first hand, inadequate, disproportionate in what concerns the actions of individuals versus the social overall characteristics and structures, given that a simple individual appears to have an infinitesimal power to influence the society. Yet, patiently, Marion Young offers with each page a reasonable and appropriate answer, not that of wishful thinking, neither that of theoretical values and expectancies. Her purpose is to conceptualize such responsibility, considering that “we lack

good conceptual tools for thinking about individual responsibility in relation to structural social processes” (Young 2011, 26).

Therefore, we are invited to assume the task of thinking the aporia of the reciprocal influence between individuals and the complex construct that is the society they live in. As well, we must question ourselves what is to be done when injustice occurs in this society, respectively what is our responsibility, each one’s responsibility, regarding this matter.

Marion Young claims that this kind of responsibility – the responsibility for (social) justice – is different in essence, not in degree, from the concept of responsibility dominant in legal and moral theory, the last one being characterized by individualization, by identifying blame-worthy or duty-charged individuals.

Specific to social injustice would be quite the opposite, that there is no individuation which would solve the case and absolve the rest of the individuals, so that each person involved in the social interactions which lead to the respective injustice is called to responsibility.

One of the examples Marion Young works with is Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, where she identifies a scale of responsibility for the Nazi crimes as follows:

“(1) those who are guilty of crimes; (2) those who are not guilty of crimes, but who bear responsibility because they participated in the society and provided the guilty agents with at least passive support that undergirded their power; (3) those who took action to distance themselves from the wrongs, either through efforts at preventing some of them or through forms of withdrawal; and (4) those who publicly opposed or resisted the wrongful actions. As I read these distinctions, the first of these concerns moral and legal matters, the second political, the third moral again, and the fourth political.” (Young 2011, 81)

This evaluation differentiates a political responsibility, respectively the second and the fourth position, which is properly approachable by the responsibility for justice, and I shall try to explain why, for Marion Young, this one is not

compatible with the moral and legal version of responsibility – which ends with liability. Those guilty of crimes fall under the liability model of responsibility, therefore are identified, their actions are connected to the crimes in a consequential manner. But what happens if we try to extend this model to the ones who merely participated in the society and provided passive support? What are we going to consider them? Accomplices? But some of them did not do anything but continue to live their lives and work within the German society, providing indirectly the resources for the crimes. Their actions cannot be connected to the crimes except through a variable chain of interdependencies, evidence of the social structures. Of what nature is their responsibility? Hannah Arendt considers it to be political, namely their passivity offered support for the murderous regime governing the State, the society they were part of. Why does guilt not apply in their case? Hannah Arendt speaks one year later about:

“the well-known fallacy of the concept of collective guilt as first applied to the German people and its collective past – all of Germany stands accused and the whole of German history from Luther to Hitler – which in practice turned into a highly effective whitewash of all those who had actually done something, for where all are guilty, no one is.” (Arendt 2003, 21)

“There is no such thing as collective guilt or collective innocence; guilt and innocence make sense only if applied to individuals.” (Arendt 2003, 29)

By generalizing guilt, we lose its sense and role. Therefore, when dealing with social-scale injustice, we must properly comprehend its nature, which does not elude liability (the guilty identifiable individuals should be legally and morally penalized), but extends political responsibility to all the individuals participating to the unjust social outcomes. These individuals are not identifiable, only the consequences of their joint actions are recognisable, and each individual is touched by a personal responsibility, as participant to the society and its joined effects.

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Up to this point, I resumed the conceptual lines obtained by Marion Young from Hannah Arendt's meditations on guilt and responsibility (this discussion takes place in the third chapter of Young's book), and along these lines she will sketch in the next chapters an adequate model of responsibility for social (in)justice. The first two chapters deal with less radical forms of injustice, one of them being poverty, and the starting point is the American social policies of the last fifty years. Her interest in this case is the same, to obtain significant meanings in order to conceptualize responsibility for justice. In what concerns poverty,

“a just society appropriately asks to what extent the relative material disadvantage of a person is a consequence of choices that he or she has made, and to what extent it derives from circumstances out of her or his control.” (Young 2011, 27)

This bifurcation of causes or determinations aims at circumscribing the social structures and processes which condition the trajectory and possibilities of a person's life, in order to see if one's poverty is one's personal responsibility or if the social structures he/she belongs to have determined somehow his/her poverty. If the social structures have contributed indeed to poverty, then we are entitled to speak of social injustice and it is the responsibility of each member of the society to act as to modify those structures. We are told that

“structures describe a set of socially caused *conditions* that *position* a large number of people in similar ways. Nevertheless, each person so positioned is responsible for how she or he takes up these conditions.” (Young 2011, 18-19)

In order to clarify how social structures are to be understood, political theorists are called to the bar by Marion Young, presenting their solutions for social justice. Dworkin considers that justice should be made by rectifying and compensating the inequalities existent in the circumstances beyond a person's control, what he calls a matter of luck. Marion Young underlines that Dworkin's theory tends to

understand social conditionings as matters of fate (good or bad), and after accepting them attempts at compensating the injustice. She argues that among these conditionings there are institutions, practices and relations which can be reformed so as to produce less inequality to begin with, if the individuals involved in these structures make the right effort (Young 2011, 35).

Young considers that Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration is perhaps the most thorough account of the relationships between social structure and individual action.

“On Giddens’s account, when individuals act, they are doing two things at once: (1) They are trying to bring about a state of affairs that they intend, and (2) they are reproducing the structural properties, the positional relations of rules and resources, on which they draw for these actions.” (Young 2011, 60)

Therefore, individuals act in already sketched social patterns of interaction and evaluation, they re-enact and most often confirm them. This insight is of high importance for Marion Young. Firstly, it offers a living connection between individuals and social structures, the latter depending on their instantiations in individual actions. Secondly, it offers good arguments against the reification of these structures. Marion Young asserts that, properly understood, social structures are in fact processes, leaning on personal interactions. Her claim is that our responsibility does not concern only the others, but also the social existent patterns of interaction with others, which seem (in fact they are not) beyond our reach and control.

In my opinion, this is in fact one of the most powerful ideas of Marion Young’s book: it is our responsibility to modify our understanding of social structures, so as to stop conceiving them as objective and fatalist determinations, as it is our responsibility to endeavor to modify these structures, if unjust social outcomes result. An equally important corollary to this idea is that our responsibility exceeds our conscious intentions and personal acts. Maybe this is what Levinas had in mind when he spoke of an ethical suspicion that I might contribute to others’ suffering without willing to.

“Mon « au monde » ou ma « place au soleil », mon chez-moi, n'ont-ils pas été usurpation des lieux qui sont à l'autre homme déjà par moi opprimé ou affamé? Citons encore Pascal: « C'est ma place au soleil, voilà le commencement et l'image de l'usurpation de toute la terre. » Crainte pour tout ce que mon exister, malgré son innocence intentionnelle et consciente, peut accomplir de violence et de meurtre.” (Levinas 1991, 147-148)

Marion Young visits Levinas' thinking as well, identifying a tension between the general responsibilities for justice and the concrete responsibilities to particular persons in interaction (Young 2011, 161).

Besides the reification of social structures, this is precisely the second obstacle in front of the responsibility for social justice: the denial of the connection between myself and the socially mediated others. Marion Young claims that we are charged with responsibility for distant others, given that the social outcomes are the result of the interactive participation of each individual to the society.

“Because we dwell on the stage of history, and not simply in our houses, we cannot avoid the imperative to have a relationship with actions and events performed by institutions of our society, often in our name, and with our passive or active support.[...]

The imperative of political responsibility consists in watching these institutions, monitoring their effects to make sure that they are not grossly harmful, and maintaining organized public spaces where such watching and monitoring can occur and citizens can speak publicly and support one another in their efforts to prevent suffering. To the extent that we fail in this, we fail in our responsibility, even though we have committed no crime and should not be blamed.” (Young 2011, 88)

Institutions, social structures, rules, laws, values, habits, all stand for settled ways of living with the others. Many of them are settled before we were born, we take them over, yet we reiterate them through our actions, sometimes we disagree

with the way they are settled, we identify injustices, inadvertences, misconceptions, prejudices. The complexity of this interactive network may seem too much for a single individual to deal with. Yet, we are capable to make our way through it, better or worse, with much or little understanding.

Marion Young offers us an attempt at assuming our position in this network, and her claim is that to do this properly we need to understand the specific responsibility we encounter as participants. She calls it responsibility for justice, or political responsibility, and the task assigned to us is described in the last paragraph I quoted above. We may not be personally guilty for the injustice in our societies, we may even behave morally and legally flawless, yet we are responsible for social injustice, because each of us participates, mediately, to the current unjust outcomes of the society.

Given the all too short review I provided, I had to leave aside the extended examples and arguments that Marion Young used and discussed in order to support her ideas. Thus, the direct contact with her argumentation is highly recommendable for those interested in the issues mentioned along this text.

## REFERENCES

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