

# Alternative ideals

Iris Marion Young, 1949–2006

She entered the room with a smile, putting me at ease at once. I had emailed to request an interview for the *Women's Philosophy Review*. She had agreed, and we set up the meeting while she was visiting the University of Bath in 1999. All was recorded, all transcribed; the result was published unedited, including her gentle laugh, often with a playful edge, always with the grace of one immersed in and continuously learning from the world around her ('Theorizing with Practical Intent', *Women's Philosophy Review* 26, 2000). This August, an email from a feminist colleague informed me of her passing away. After a year and a half fighting cancer, she had died at the age of fifty-seven.

Hers was a unique voice – bold without being abrasive, serious without being humourless, incisive and introspective in equal measure. She was a generous writer who took care to draw attention to lesser-known works than her own. In this, she lived up to the feminist ideal of mutual support. She lived her values.

Iris Young saw her work as following two tracks: a political theory or philosophy track, on the one hand, and this female embodiment track, on the other. *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press, 1990) marked her debut in the world of political philosophy. It was followed a few years later by *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Polity* (Princeton University Press, 1997) and *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2000). In the second track, *Throwing like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Female Body Experience* (Indiana University Press, 1990) brought together work in the phenomenology of female embodiment that she had begun in 1977. Recently republished in the series *Studies in Feminist Philosophy*, under the title *On Female Body Experience* (Oxford University Press, 2005), these path-breaking essays were joined by the previously unpublished 'Menstrual Meditations'. Here she revisits Simone de Beauvoir's reflections on the 'ambivalent' experience of feminine maturation. She fondly describes



the experience of reading *The Second Sex* again as one of coming home to a mother to find her wiser than she had thought in her younger days. Still, she finds a tone of resignation in Beauvoir. Ever optimistic, Young writes of menstruation: 'This female body experience does not offer the possibility of transvaluing the values of a commodified, efficiency-oriented, rationalist culture. It can, however, speak to all of us about the reflective

possibilities of moody meditation, if we listen.’ With barely suppressed naughtiness, she writes, ‘Heidegger himself would no doubt be shocked to have his lofty text appropriated for the sake of revealing human possibilities in unspeakable menstrual experiences.’

In her work in political philosophy and policy, Young saw herself as following the method of critical theory, which ‘reflects on existing social relations and processes to identify what we experience as valuable in them, but as present only intermittently, partially or potentially.’ Thus, to identify ideals of inclusive democracy, she reflected on ‘the experience of actually existing democracy, looking for possibilities glimmering in it but which we nevertheless feel lacking – experiences such as reasonable yet passionate persuasion, accountable representation, participatory civic activity linked to authoritative state action, or transnational institutions for discussing and addressing global problems’ (*Inclusion and Democracy*). She developed the idea of deep democracy, whilst noting the recent blatant abjuration of one of the basic principles of democracy, when ‘nineteen of the world’s leading liberal democracies have waged a ghastly war without any of them formally consulting with either their citizens or their elected representatives about whether to do so.’

Iris Young was an activist-intellectual, engaged in grassroots political activity: joining pickets with striking workers, marching in anti-war demonstrations, collecting signatures. Her activism taught her that an open and fair democratic process can sometimes enable weaker parties to get across the wisdom of their position. In this she valued the heterogeneity of the public as a resource. She also underscored the importance of identifying the affective element in political communication.

She showed what it means to theorize with a practical intent: ‘I think of it as a normative principle that theory that is self-enclosed and is not supposed to be revealing in a way that could inform action is only a game!’ Her writings attempt to ‘recover’ the human values that lie distorted, hidden or ossified in the trappings of patriarchal norms. The values of care, meaningful work, homemaking, affectivity in communication or heterogeneity of the public are used to envision alternative ideals of social organization.

Young’s political work was complemented by her prolific writing and her travelling to engage in dialogue with other thinkers. As an interpreter for the United Nations, she spoke more than a dozen languages. Her own work has been translated into more than twenty languages. She was born and grew up in New York City, graduating from Queens College (1966–70). She was led to philosophy by the congruence of two unrelated factors: her disenchantment with the scholarship required of an English major, her first choice at college, and an attraction to debating encountered in the youth groups of the Presbyterian Church in her high-school days. In college, she was influenced by existentialism. Her PhD. from Pennsylvania State University was a reading of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. She taught philosophy and political theory in various places, including Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Miami University, University of Pittsburgh, and the University of Chicago. Her influence extends beyond political philosophy to philosophy of education and social policy.

At the time I interviewed her, Young had found herself needing to think more about war and violence. She thought it important to ‘take up again the question of glorification of violence, the connection of violence with power, and the connection of violence and power with men’. We can read her views on the subject in her forthcoming *Global Quandaries: On War, Self-determination and Global Justice* (Polity, 2006). She was developing a social-connection model of responsibility for justice, covering a whole range of issues from labour conditions in the clothes industry to reparations for slavery and colonialism. We would do well to continue her work in her spirit.

**Meena Dhanda**

Meena Dhanda’s interview with Iris Marion Young, ‘Theorizing with Practical Intent’, is available at [www.dur.ac.uk/swipuk/datapubs/2000\\_iris\\_young\\_interview.pdf](http://www.dur.ac.uk/swipuk/datapubs/2000_iris_young_interview.pdf).