

Les ateliers de l'éthique The Ethics Forum

Les ateliers de l'éthique
The Ethics Forum

Public Reason that Speaks to People: Iris Marion Young and the problem of internal exclusion

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Volume 2, Number 1, Spring 2007

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1044658ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1044658ar>

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Publisher(s)

Centre de recherche en éthique de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

1718-9977 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Chambers, S. (2007). Public Reason that Speaks to People: Iris Marion Young and the problem of internal exclusion. *Les ateliers de l'éthique / The Ethics Forum*, 2(1), 36–40. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1044658ar>

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DOSSIER: IN MEMORIAM, IRIS MARION YOUNG (1949-2006)

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VOLUME 2 NUMÉRO 1
PRINTEMPS 2007
ARTICLES :

PUBLIC REASON THAT SPEAKS TO
PEOPLE: IRIS MARION YOUNG AND
THE PROBLEM OF INTERNAL
EXCLUSION

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There is hardly a corner of political theory that has not benefited from Iris Marion Young's critical and discerning eye. Democratic theory, feminist theory, theories of justice and globalization, race and identity, public sphere and responsibility, equality and poverty, her interests and writing spread out and touch all issues pertaining to repair the world. In this remark on the impact of her work, I want to take up one small but for me very important contribution she made to democratic theory generally and deliberative democratic theory more particularly.

A cornerstone of the deliberative turn in democratic theory has been the insistence that democracy means more and requires more than equal voting rights. The move from a vote-centric to a talk-centric view of democracy has shone a spotlight on the processes, contexts and milieus in which citizens form their opinions, make claims and demands on each other, come to understandings, ask for justifications and expect accountability. Democratic theory now focuses on the communicative spaces of opinion and will formation. And from its first appearance on the scene, deliberative democratic theory,

whether influence by Habermas or Rawls, has stressed the values of inclusion and equality in these processes. It is not enough to give everyone the vote if everyone does not also have a say. But nestled within earlier articulations of deliberative democracy was a blind spot. Iris Marian Young exposed this blind spot and in so doing changed deliberative democratic theory in a dramatic way.

In her work on inclusion, especially the 2000 book *Inclusion and Democracy*, Young noted that most people interested in inclusion focus on the problem of external exclusion and miss what she calls internal inclusion. External exclusion “refers to the fact that allegedly participatory processes often exclude members of racial and ethnic minorities, have fewer women than men, fewer working class people than professionals, are often age-biased, and rarely involve people with disabilities.”¹ The problem here is one of being left out – especially left out of discussion and decision-making process. With regard to external exclusions, Young and deliberative democratic theory are on the same page as a great deal of that theory is precisely designed as a critical standard against which to expose the failures of the public sphere to include all citizens in the conversation.

It is with her second type of exclusion, what she calls internal exclusion, that Young changed the face of deliberative democratic theory as well a great deal of public reason literature. Here she argued that it was not enough to have excluded minorities in the room if the unstated expectations of appropriate or proper speaking diminished the value and weight of what they said. The problem here is not being left out but rather not being heard. By questioning what we consider appropriate and “reasoned” contributions to deliberation, Young exposed a rationalist bias in much of deliberative democracy theory. She opened up an amazingly rich world of idioms, cadences, passion and poetry closed to deliberative democracy by an unquestioned legacy of the Enlightenment. This is the anti-rhetoric legacy that sees serious debate about political and public issues to require a rhetoric-free zone governed by reason. But the mistake here is to think that reason (in the sense of having good reasons) can be identified with a particular way or style of speaking.

For many Enlightenment thinkers, rhetoric was the category in which all inappropriate speech fell. It contained not only impassioned appeals to the heart but any speech that trespassed beyond the narrow confines of reasoned argument. Listen to Kant on the subject: he defines rhetoric as the art “of deceiving by means of beau-

tiful illusion” and tells us that it would be beneath the dignity of reasonable men to “exhibit even a trace of the exuberance of wit and imagination, and still more, the art of talking men round and prejudicing them in favor” of some proposal.² The *Federalist Papers* is another Enlightenment document where one can see the enshrining of a dispassionate, cool headed, moderated, literal, and informative speech as the voice of neutral reason.

Iris Marion Young questioned the assumptions propping up the distrust of rhetoric and indeed any speech that appeared to *appeal* to the interlocutor. Her arguments are as devastating as they are simple. There are three. First, when it comes to political speech, the dispassionate versus passionate dichotomy so popular among the Founding Fathers is deeply suspect. The claim that dispassionate speech is somehow neutral and rational is itself often a rhetorical move to dress-up self-interested claims in the guise of neutrality. Her second argument is that attempting to identify a mode of speech that is non-rhetorical or neutral often has the effect of excluding those who speak in a different idiom or with a different cadence. The groups regularly identified as lacking sufficient neutrality in speech have been overwhelmingly drawn from the marginalized or less powerful in society. Finally, she argues that rhetoric can actually be a very positive force in dialogue. In trying to persuade a particular audience, rhetoric can be attentive to the needs and interests of the audience in a way that a detached, ‘neutral’ speech may not. Young offers a compelling account of the ways that passion, trope, metaphor and evocation can enhance dialogue and further the ends of mutual understanding. While all three arguments are powerful, it is the last that has had the most profound impact on deliberative theory. The reason why we should “allow” multiple rhetorics, forms of expression and nontraditional communication into deliberation is not simply because devaluing these forms of speech devalues the contributions of those who speak in these voices, that is, it is not simply a matter of fairness. We also should open the doors to multiple forms of speech because in deliberation we want people to speak *to* each other and not at each other.

Running through all three of these arguments and indeed her whole discussion of internal exclusion is the insight that deliberation is not just about exchanging reasons, it is about real people speaking to each other. The importance of this distinction came home to me when, on first reading *Inclusion and Democracy*, I noticed that Young devoted an entire section to greeting. What, I thought to myself,

has greeting got to do with the serious business of democracy under conditions of pluralism. Through a wonderful rereading of Levinas, Young argued that the public exchange of reasons cannot hope to have an impact on democracy unless participants acknowledge each other and indeed touch each other with their word. This dimension of communication requires more than arguments: “The category of greeting thus adds something important to ideals of inclusive public reason. It is not simply that participants in public discussion should have reasons that others can accept, but they must also explicitly *acknowledge* the others whom they aim to persuade.”³ While greeting is only one of the many things we can do in deliberation to make people feel acknowledged and listened to, it highlights that successful deliberation always needs to be attentive to the participants as people. Thus rhetoric rather than seen as a tool of manipulation should be seen as a tool of communication, indeed a certain sign of respect and recognition. It asks us to seek out the words, tone and narrative that will touch the other. But more importantly, it asks us to resist the temptation to evaluate the cogency of a claim or argument on the basis of the way it is said. She tells us that we “should not privilege specific ways of making claims and arguments. Participants in communicative democracy should listen to all modes of expression that aim to co-operate and reach a solution to collective problems.”⁴

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¹ Archon Fung, “Deliberation’s Darker Side: Six questions for Iris Marion Young and Jane Mansbridge.” *National Civic Review*. (Winter 2004) p. 49

² Kant, *Critique of Judgment*. Cambridge (Cambridge University Press, 2000) 204 [5:327]

³ *Inclusion and Democracy*, (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 62.

⁴ *Inclusion and Democracy*, (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 80.

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