## **Autonomous Development and Global Empowerment**

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Inspired by the emergence and transformative potential of a transnational public sphere, Iris Marion Young tackled problems of global justice in her later works, with interesting implications for conceptualizing political responsibility beyond borders. In a series of essays, some of which were reprinted recently in *Global Challenges: War, Self-Determination, and Responsibility for Justice*, Young engaged with issues as wide-ranging as the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, aboriginal self-governance, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, trends in American foreign policy, the NATO intervention in Kosovo, and the global anti-sweatshop movement.

In this paper, I draw on Young's work to construct a paradigm of "autonomous development." The paradigm of autonomous development has four conceptual dimensions: it is grounded in a relational conception of agency; it calls for the elimination of oppression and domination in social relations; it emphasizes the need to evaluate social institutions in structural terms; and it posits a model of political responsibility grounded in social connection. All four dimensions of autonomous development highlight the social constitution of agency and the significance of the broader social context within which this occurs. Having outlined the main tenets of the paradigm of autonomous development, I turn to Young again to flesh out its implications for democratic citizenship and global justice. I conclude by considering ways in which this idea can facilitate the practice of a feminist agenda of global empowerment.

### **Autonomous Development and Social Connection**

The starting point for the paradigm of autonomous development is a relational understanding of agency. <sup>1</sup> Agency is relationally constituted when agents are not conceptualized as strictly separated from distinct others who neither influence them nor are influenced by them. In a relational conception where agents are always seen as embedded in various different patterns of fluid social relations with others, autonomy refers to their ability to make their own decisions in a socially conscious manner. Social consciousness requires that agents recognize their relations with others and how their actions affect them. Autonomous decision-making implies both the prima facie obligation of non-interference from others and the expectation that agents will be prepared to work together with others in common processes of adjudication, negotiation, and problem-solving when the need arises. Such common processes may become necessary when conflicts or shared problems occur in social relations, or when agents' actions contribute to the emergence of problematic inequalities that perpetuate injustice.

Relational autonomy is closely tied to a commitment to promote justice in social relations, in light of the essential importance of a just social context for the autonomous development and exercise of agency. Justice, for Young, involves putting into place the institutional conditions for the elimination of oppression and domination.<sup>2</sup> Oppression occurs when agents are prevented from developing and exercising their individual capacities and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Young 2000a, Young 2001b, Young 2004a, Young 2005.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Young 1990.

possibilities for collective communication. Domination occurs when agents are inhibited from participation in determining their actions or the conditions for their actions. Both oppression and domination stand in the way of the autonomous development of agency. Both can a present significant obstacle to the attainment of justice and democratic inclusion in a variety of social contexts, including global social relations. Finally, neither is intended as a comprehensive concept that encompasses all possible manifestations of unjust social relations—for example, Young acknowledges that they probably do not adequately address injustices that characterize peasant experiences—and both need to be contextually recast based on the concrete social relations under scrutiny.

The emphasis on eliminating oppression and domination from social relations leads to a concern with structural injustice.<sup>3</sup> The emphasis on structural analysis emerges from Young's acknowledgement of the structural inequalities that can pervade social institutions. Structural inequalities entail sets of reproduced social processes that reinforce one another to facilitate or constrain individual actions.<sup>4</sup> The problem with such entrenched processes is their tendency to reproduce social and economic inequalities in the political realm. In a context of structural inequality, members of groups who already possess social and economic advantages receive political advantages that facilitate their political actions, while members of disadvantaged groups find their political actions unfairly constrained. Broader group-based comparisons that reach beyond the political domain of formal equality are required for identifying and addressing structural inequality. Where structural social inequalities are widespread, democratic justice requires more than equal formal rights for representation and political participation, but also special measures for a better inclusion of the needs, interests, and perspectives of members of socially disadvantaged and marginalized groups into the political process in all relevant social contexts, domestic and global.

The focus on structural injustice yields an account of political responsibility rooted in social connection rather than liability. For Young, a social connection model of responsibility has several features that make it particularly suitable for scrutinizing large-scale structural inequalities. Most significantly, unlike the liability model with which it contrasts, the social connection model does not require the identification of a clear perpetrator for the harms suffered by a disadvantaged agent. Instead, it questions the normal operation of background conditions which structure relations between agents and give rise to reinforcing patterns of advantage and disadvantage. As a result, unlike the liability model of responsibility which focuses on reparations for harms suffered in the past, the social connection model is forward looking and outcome oriented, more open-ended what constitutes its fulfillment, and more accommodating of schemes of shared responsibility. Agents have responsibilities towards all other agents they assume in conducting their activities in the social connection model, albeit in different ways and to varying degrees in different social contexts, since such assumptions provide the expectations on the basis of which agents act and joins them in common practices.

The paradigm of autonomous development brings these insights together. The relational conception of agency anchors autonomous development by positing agents who recognize their relations with and commitments to others in making their decisions. The

<sup>5</sup> Young 2004b, Young 2006b.

<sup>6</sup> For a concrete application of the responsibility model, see Young 2006a.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Young 1990, Young 2000a, Young 2001a, Young 2004a.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Young 2000a, Young 2001b.

effective exercise of autonomous development requires the elimination of oppression and domination. Structural injustice undermines processes of autonomous development. Political responsibility emerges as key to the stewarding of social relations favorable to autonomous development.

Social connection runs through all four aspects of autonomous development. Agents are conceived of as socially embedded and socially conscious from the start. Social justice and democratic inclusion are posited as essential for the autonomous development of agency in social contexts that are free from oppression and domination. Social institutions are evaluated in structural terms in order to ensure that pervasive patterns of social advantage and disadvantage are identified and addressed. Political responsibility is grounded in a social connection model that can deal with social embeddedness and structural injustice, both at home and abroad.

## **Autonomous Development and Democratic Citizenship**

In democratic states, the paradigm of autonomous development requires putting into place conditions that facilitate the effective exercise of democratic values and political responsibility. In the concrete context of the U.S., democratic values are threatened by the prominence of the "welfare state" and "security state" paradigms, both of which Young critized for entrenching gendered relations of domination and undermining the practice of democratic citizenship.

The welfare state paradigm establishes a gendered hierarchy of domination between the providers and recipients of welfare. Welfare capitalism depoliticizes public life by placing distributive conflicts into the hands of presumably "impartial" experts and administrators. The effect of privileging the false presumption of impartiality is the silencing of the perspectives of members of oppressed groups, who often tend to be the beneficiaries of welfare. As a result, new forms of domination associated with the professionalized division of labor emerge, which further reinforce the distance between members of economically advantaged and disadvantaged groups. Welfare legislation is illustrative of the problematic practical implications of the welfare paradigm. Relying on a masculine and faulty ideology of self-sufficiency through work, welfare policies are based on a discourse that reduces work to having a paid job, even if that job is exploitative and meaningless. Social contribution is erroneously equated with this impoverished notion of paid work in this ideology and receiving social assistance is presented as civic shortcoming. In practice, the welfare paradigm "systematically distorts people's understanding of their social conditions and reinforces unjust relations of economic and social power."

The security paradigm establishes a gendered hierarchy of domination between the providers and recipients of security. This hierarchy is best captured in the logic of masculinist protection, which is based in gendered relations of subordination. <sup>10</sup> In the masculinist protection bargain, women give up their autonomy in return for protection from aggression

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Young 1990.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> The presumption of impartiality is false because there can be no real impartiality. All perspectives always come from some place to which they are partial. Young 1990.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Young 2000b.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Young 2003b, Young 2003d.

provided by the masculine head of the household. Men incur loving self-sacrifices for the wellbeing of women, but only within this structure of familial subordination. Women who refuse to submit to the bargain face the possibility of aggression from other "bad" men and even attacks from their own supposed protectors. A similar gendered logic pervades the authoritarian security state, whose rulers conduct surveillance at home and wage war abroad, all in the name of protection. When citizens submit to arbitrary power and rulers rely on the mobilization of fear to justify their actions, democratic values suffer. Post-9/11 US politics illustrates the security bargain at work for Young, with wars in Afghanistan and Iraq being justified under the guise of protection and yielding an erosion of democratic rights and processes at home.

Both the welfare and security paradigms undermine democratic citizenship, because they entrench hierarchies of domination that are inconsistent with autonomous development. Recipients of welfare are viewed as less than equal citizens in light of their inability to be self-sufficient without societal assistance. They are expected to submit to conditions set by already privileged and allegedly impartial experts, conditions that minimize their agency, fail to recognize their contributions to society, and deny them the possibility of seeking meaningful work. Recipients of security are expected to give up their autonomy and submit to the arbitrary decisions of the protector-rulers, who freely mobilize fears and posit enemies to combat, at home and abroad. In both cases, relations of democratic equality are undermined, since the protected and the provided for are no longer equal to the protectors and providers.

Rooted in a relational conception of agency, the autonomous development paradigm rejects both types of domination. Recognizing the social connections between autonomous agents, it calls for taking responsibility for the attainment of shared goals and solution of shared problems within the framework of democratic political institutions that are based on mutual respect and the political equality of all citizens. The responsible provision of welfare and security begins from admitting that no state can ensure the welfare or guarantee the security of its citizens. The attainment of welfare and security are largely a matter of carefully assessing risks and opportunities for action in light of their expected consequences and normative implications. Policies that undermine the equality or rights of citizens are incompatible with democratic values; policies that make grand promises or offer guarantees are generally suspect; and policies that are inattentive to existing patterns of oppression, domination, and structural injustice are inadequate.

Finally, policies that extend the welfare and security paradigms to the world at large are also problematic and have to be replaced by policies that promote relations of mutual respect and political equality among the world's peoples. Citizens and rulers of wealthy and powerful states must not think they stand in a position of impartial paternal authority over the poorer and less powerful peoples and persons of the world simply because they have the capacity to provide or protect. Providers and protectors do not know what is best for their beneficiaries and must not make their assistance and rescue conditional upon terms they set without the full participation of the provided for and protected. Hierarchies of domination must be rejected by democratic citizens, whether they are produced at home or abroad.

# **Autonomous Development and Global Democratic Justice**

In the world, the paradigm of autonomous development involves the establishment of just and democratic relations between self-determining collective units. Closely associated

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Young 2003d.

with democratic politics, collective self-determination has occupied an important normative place in 20<sup>th</sup> century international relations. Despite its normative appeal and widespread deployment in the process of decolonization, the meaning and scope of self-determination have been hotly contested and narrowly restricted to independence for former colonies, giving rise to an international system that has favored the preservation of sovereignty in most other contexts. The autonomous development paradigm questions the normative validity of sovereignty as it has traditionally been understood and posits self-determination as an essential building block of a just and democratic global order.

In fleshing out the contours of self-determination, Young compares her conception of "self-determination as non-domination" to the standard conception of "self-determination as non-intervention" associated with Westphalian sovereignty. Self-determination as non-intervention involves exclusive control within the borders of the state free from outside interference. This account of self-determination is inadequate for addressing the problem of domination for two reasons: first, many fluid relations of connection remain between newly independent colonies and former colonizers "the morning after sovereignty" in ways that allow for ongoing relations of less direct external domination; and second, non-interventions does not protect persons and collectivities from new patterns of internal domination that may arise.

Self-determination as non-domination does not falsely assume collectivities that are strictly separated from each other's webs of influence. Neither does it bestow self-determining units with full and exclusive internal control and complete independence from external units. Being rooted in social connection and relational agency, self-determination as non-domination envisages socially-embedded collectivities that make their decisions in socially-conscious ways and are prepared to work with other collectivities when conflicts, common problems, or structural injustices arise. In ways that parallel the relational autonomy of individuals, self-determining entities set their own ends and act towards their realization, but within the limits of respect for and cooperation with other entities they interact with and are related to.

Self-determination as non-domination does not stand in sharp opposition to self-determination as non-intervention, but clarifies the domain of application of non-intervention. As in the case of individuals, self-determining collectivities enjoy a prima facie presumption of external non-intervention, but within the limits of being mindful of the possible adverse external impact their actions may have on others with whom they stand in a relation. Where relations of domination exist in external or internal relations, for example, this prima facie presumption of non-intervention would be suspended. Finally, to address conflicts, common problems, and structural injustices that can emerge in their various relationships, self-determining entities are ready to work together in shared democratic institutions they form with other self-determining units on the basis of equal status and mutual respect. <sup>13</sup>

Despite having paid extensive lip-service to self-determination, the current international system does not enable its responsible practice. Westphalian sovereignty quickly associates self-determination with secession for the collectivity exercising it followed by non-intervention after independence. As already pointed out, this does not adequately address new forms of internal and external domination that may persist after sovereignty is attained. Furthermore, the international system does not adequately constrain power politics and aspirations of hegemonic domination. Inherently prone to partial interests even when it dresses itself up in benign motives such as the selfless promotion of the common good,

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Young 2000a, Young 2001b, Young 2002b, Young 2005.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Young 2005.

hegemony poses a threat to collective self-determination and can all too easily assumes dictatorial forms. <sup>14</sup> Dictatorship, for Young, refers to "a regime willing and able to exert its will without consulting with or answering to those affected by its decisions and actions." <sup>15</sup> Young describes the current hegemony of the U.S. in the international system as one of "aspiring dictatorship" because of its insistence "on demanding cooperation from other states on terms it sets" without consultation or adequate avenues for participation into its rule-making, both in the economic and military realms. <sup>16</sup> Enforcement actions undertaken by the U.S., as in the case of the war in Iraq or the vigorous pursuit of a narrowly supported Washington consensus, are illegitimate and must be countered by withdrawals of cooperation. These actions also reveal problematic outward extensions of the security and welfare paradigms that must be rejected.

The realization of self-determination as non-domination requires moving beyond Westphalian sovereignty and hegemonic stability towards a pluralist international system with multi-level democratic practices that can combine self-rule with shared rule. <sup>17</sup> Federal modes of governance can be particularly well suited for the institutionalization of these goals and can be crafted in a variety of ways to better correspond to the realities of the selfdetermining units working within them. While these units need not be territorially constituted, they need not exclude territorially constituted sovereign states, either, who are recognized as powerful self-determining collectivities that exist among a multiplicity of other possible self-determining entities. Multiple levels of governance are necessary in Young's pluralist vision, but higher levels of governance do not necessarily have higher degrees of authority or decision-making power. The relationship between different levels ranging from local to regional to global is not one of centralization and hierarchy. Instead, each level is charged with functions that it can best accomplish in order to realize the overall goal of selfdetermination as non-domination and accountability flows in both directions. Lower levels units have autonomy within higher level units in whose procedures and decisions they can participate. Higher level units protect the autonomy of lower level units within them, facilitate conflict resolution and cooperation among them, and attend to shared problems and structural concerns.

Global labor injustice and global economic inequalities offer prime examples of the structural concerns that would best be addressed at the global level in a multi-level democratic international system. Young observes that serious harms are produced by structural processes that transcend state borders and configure global labor relations. To illustrate, unhealthy working conditions and working relations replete with oppression and domination characterize sweatshops of the global apparel industry. Located mostly in the global South, sweatshops supply apparel retailers who sell their goods mostly in the global North. Critical levels of need deprivation are widespread in many parts of the global South, which further constrain the autonomy of sweatshop workers, as well as the life and survival prospects of those who are not fortunate enough to have a job. Background conditions that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Young 2004a.

<sup>15</sup> Young 2007, p. 146.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Young 2004a.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Young 2003c.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Young 2004b, Young 2006b.

leave few options to individual workers are replayed at the level of collectivities when public authorities in developing countries compete with each other to attract global work orders by offering retail companies favorable cost-reducing bargains that come at the expense of workplace safety and labor justice.

These harmful structural processes cannot effectively be dealt with in a strictly state-centric international system and require multi-level governance mechanisms that can empower exploited workers. Forming sweatshop worker unions and involving them in decisions concerning workplace standards, ensuring representation from women in sweatshop governance schemes in an industry that mostly employs young women, joining global fair trade consumer movements that pressure apparel retailers to adopt and expect minimum workplace conditions from all their suppliers, devising intergovernmental cooperation schemes that implement apparel taxes in the global North for goods manufactures in the global South and transfer these funds to public authorities in the countries of origin to reduce global economic inequalities are all possible examples of inter-related structural remedies for a structural problem that can be adopted in a democratic international system committed to autonomous development.

# **Practicing Autonomous Development**

The paradigm of autonomous development inspired by Young's work has at least two important roles to play in the practice of a feminist agenda of global empowerment. The first role is interpretive and involves what Young calls ideology critique. Interpretation exposes problematic practices that stifle autonomous development. Interpretation reveals gendered hierarchies of domination that are embedded in welfare states and security states, Westphalian sovereignty, hegemonic stability, and global labor practices. The second role is pragmatic and applies the main tenets and ideals of the paradigm to concrete problems in democratic politics, comparative development, international relations, global ethics, and post-colonialism to devise better ways in which they may be addressed in a contextually sensitive manner. In both its interpretive and pragmatic moments, the paradigm of autonomous development takes gender seriously as an important dimension of structural analysis and aims to empower vulnerable agents.

Two areas of further investigation immediately become apparent for a feminist agenda of global empowerment guided by the paradigm of autonomous development. The first concerns the identification of concrete substantive principles that can specify the content of political responsibility in the context of particular cooperative practices. Here, the investigation runs into Young's general skepticism of the enterprise of specifying shared principles and can benefit from turning elsewhere. Somewhat surprisingly, Rawls, the grand theorist of principles of justice, emerges as a particularly useful conversation partner for this purpose. Many points of connection exist between these two leading thinkers, as Young herself was explicit with respect to the significance they both attached to the basic structure of society for justice. Other themes in Rawls's work that accord the potential for a fruitful exchange include his commitments to pluralism, equality, and mutual respect in relations between peoples, all of which figure heavily in Young's vision for a pluralist and democratic

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Rawls 1971, Rawls 1996, Rawls 1999a, Rawls 1999b, Rawls 2001.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Young 2006c.

international system. In light of these affinities, a dialogue between Young and Rawls on justice may be mutually enriching.

The second area of investigation is even more crucial for the practice of autonomous development. An important tension remains between the autonomous development of individual persons and collective groups in the pluralist democratic vision inspired by Young. This tension calls for the continual balancing of the claims of individuals and groups in particular contexts. Aware of potential clashes that may ensue, Young charges the global level of governance with the task of protecting individuals inside self-determining units from severe rights violations. <sup>22</sup> A lot more needs to be said about which rights individuals have in which contexts and for what reason before this can be meaningfully institutionalized. There is the added question of whether the global level is indeed the most appropriate place for resolving tensions over individual rights from lower levels. This seems to privilege higher levels of governance in ways that Young is not prepared to do and can undermine relations of two-way accountability between levels. Federalism in itself does not (and should not) provide a clear-cut solution, since specific balances of power and authority that are negotiated in federal systems can vary greatly. Ultimately, the ever-present tension between the autonomous development of individual persons and the autonomous development of a multiplicity of competing (and perhaps even overlapping) collectivities offers another strong invitation for the elaboration of contextually-sensitive substantive principles that can guide the adjudication of competing claims in ways that promote global empowerment.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Young 2007, p. 150.

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