



2014

## Iris Young, Radical Responsibility, and War

Harry van der Linden

*Butler University*, hvanderl@butler.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch\\_papers](https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers)



Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

van der Linden, Harry. "Iris Young, Radical Responsibility, and War." *Radical Philosophy Review* 17.1 (2014): 45-62. doi: 10.5840/radphilrev20143217. Available from: [http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch\\_papers/398](http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/398).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact [digitalscholarship@butler.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@butler.edu).

Published in *Radical Philosophy Review* 17.1 (2014): 45-62

## Iris Young, Radical Responsibility, and War

Harry van der Linden

*Abstract: In this paper I argue that a merit of Iris Young's social connection model of responsibility for structural injustices is that it directs the American people's responsibility for unjust wars, such as the recent war against Iraq, toward their responsibility to abolish the "war machine," including the "empire of bases," that is a contributing factor of unjust U.S. wars. I also raise two objections to her model. First, her model leads us to downplay the culpability of the American people as a political collective in voting to continue the Iraq war with the re-election of George W. Bush. Second, Young misinterprets her model of responsibility as a new type of responsibility that is conceptually completely distinct from liability responsibility rather than as offering a new ground for holding people responsible.*

### Introduction

In *Responsibility for Justice*, Iris Young articulates what she views as a new conception of responsibility, the "social connection model" of responsibility.<sup>1</sup> This new conception ascribes to moral agents who participate in (i.e., are socially connected to) structural injustices the responsibility to end these injustices. In other words, they have a "responsibility for justice." We may call it a *radical* conception because it demands that all those involved in maintaining

---

<sup>1</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Earlier statements of her view can be found in "From Guilt to Solidarity," *Dissent* (Spring 2003): 39-44; "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Volume IV, No. 4: 365-88; and her *Global Challenges: War, Self-Determination and Responsibility for Justice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), Chapter 9, "Responsibility, Social Connection, and Global Justice."

structural injustices engage in collective action aimed at fundamental institutional changes. Moreover, the conception is radical in that Young constructs her social connection model as one that encourages and promotes collective radical action, contrasting it to the familiar notion of liability responsibility for past harm that she views as often politically unproductive and divisive. Young explicates her social connection model on basis of two structural injustices: the U.S. housing market that leaves many people homeless, and the global garment market whose products are often made in sweatshops. In both cases, Young concludes that most Americans have a responsibility to try to change the injustice through collective action.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I will examine how the social connection model applies to a third case: Are U.S. citizens, as citizens of a democracy, morally responsible for their country fighting unjust wars, such as the recent war against Iraq, and, if so, what are the ramifications of such a responsibility ascription?<sup>3</sup> I will show that the connection model is in some respects promising in addressing this issue, but I also will argue that Young misconstrues her model of responsibility for justice as a new type of responsibility that is fundamentally different from liability responsibility. Let me begin by discussing the social connection model in more detail.

---

<sup>2</sup> Broadly speaking, some influential contemporary political philosophers or theorists share Young's claim that we must promote justice across borders and their writings predate her social connection model of responsibility. Young discusses the writings of Thomas Pogge, Charles Beitz, and Onora O'Neill and briefly discusses how her conception of responsibility for justice both draws from and differs from their views. See "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," 371-73 and 381-82; *Global Challenges*, 162-64; and *Responsibility for Justice*, 139-42, 150-51, and 159-60. In my opinion, what makes Young's view singularly attractive is that she pays detailed attention to how her conception of responsibility relates to radical praxis. This focus is a reflection of her own political activism, such as her involvement in the anti-sweatshop movement in Chicago, prior to her untimely death. See Ann Ferguson and Mechtild Nagel, "Introduction," in *Dancing with Iris: The Philosophy of Iris Marion Young*, ed. Ann Ferguson and Mechtild Nagel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5-7.

<sup>3</sup> The question has recently received some attention among political philosophers. See Peter A. French, "Blaming Whole Populations: The American People and the Iraq War," Chapter 11 of Peter French, *War and Dissonance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), and John M. Parrish, "Collective Responsibility and the State," *International Theory* 1.1 (2009): 119-54. Amy Sepinwall addresses the related but more narrow issue of citizen responsibility for *jus in bello* crimes in "Citizen Responsibility and the Reactive Attitudes: Blaming Americans for War Crimes in Iraq," Chapter 9 of *Accountability for Collective Wrongdoing*, ed. Tracy Isaacs and Richard Vernon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these essays, but it may be noted that they do not explore unjust U.S. wars as rooted in the structural injustice of the "war system," and it is a merit of Young's social connection model that it suggests this approach.

## The Social Connection Model of Responsibility versus Liability Responsibility

Young articulates the social connection model of responsibility as forward-looking, contrasting it with liability responsibility as backward-looking. She also describes liability responsibility as blame, fault, or guilt responsibility. In the context of social justice, liability responsibility ascriptions typically single out individuals or organizations that causally brought about some harm and failed in their duty to prevent the harm. These individuals or organizations are then appropriate subjects for blame, and we may also demand punishment or compensation for the inflicted harm. Blaming itself, it should be noted, involves establishing fault and having, usually, a negative emotional response, such as “moral anger” (including indignation and resentment), contempt, disgust, and disappointment, to the person(s) or organization(s) behind this fault. And this emotional response may express itself in a wide variety of hostile conduct, ranging from turning away to violence. Additionally, blaming may include more overt communicative acts of reproaching, reprimanding, rebuke, criticism, and the like.<sup>4</sup> Following Young, some of the harms of structural injustices may be caused by blameworthy conduct. For example, we may rightfully blame a landlord for causing homelessness through discrimination,<sup>5</sup> or it is appropriate to blame the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for ordering the demolition of many public housing units in the 1990s without guaranteeing enough low-income replacements.<sup>6</sup> Or, we may blame some bosses of sweatshops for violating local labor laws and demand that they be punished.<sup>7</sup> However, even if some actors can be appropriately blamed (and on Young’s account this is not always true of structural injustices), what is typical of structural injustices is that such blameworthy actors “are enabled and supported by wider social structures in which millions of

---

<sup>4</sup> See Georg Sher, *In Praise of Blame* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 94-95. My understanding of the practice of blaming has profited from Sher’s work. But surely his work is not the last word; it is hard to disagree with him that “blame is perplexing: both as it pertains to the person doing the blaming and as it pertains to the person blamed” (71). Similarly, the editors of a recent anthology on blame note that “work on blame is still in its infancy.” See *Blame*, ed. D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3n.2.

<sup>5</sup> Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, 106.

<sup>6</sup> See *ibid.*, 116.

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*, 131. The horrific collapse of the Rana Plaza factory (April 24, 2013) with over 1,100 people killed, coming after a string of other deadly accidents in Bangladesh’s garment industry, illustrates that liability ascriptions are important and appropriate with regard to sweatshops as structural injustice. And, of course, culpable (and criminal) neglect of even the most basic safety standards is not limited to the garment industry or Bangladesh alone.

people participate”<sup>8</sup> and that, therefore, the main cause of harms is to be found in these structures. In other words, most harms of structural injustices cannot be traced back to the culpable conduct of some specific persons or organizations but rather emerge from the conduct of millions following institutional rules and practices. It is this broad basis of structural harms that is the foundation of the forward-looking social connection model of responsibility. Young writes: “When harms result from the participation of thousands or millions of people in institutions and practices that produce injustice...such an isolating concept of responsibility [as liability responsibility] is inadequate.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, “most of us contribute to a greater or lesser degree to the production and reproduction of structural injustice precisely because we follow the accepted and expected rules and conventions of the communities in which we act.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, since most contributors to structural injustices do not intend their harms (and may even regret their occurrence), and since the causal connections between specific individual actions and the harms are obscure and mediated by numerous complex institutional mechanisms and practices, it would be an error to single out individual contributors or organized groups as blameworthy. Instead, we should view contribution (or connection) to the harms of structural injustices as a ground for arguing for a shared responsibility to eliminate the structural injustices.

The shared responsibility for justice must be discharged through collective action because only a collective agent can eliminate or reduce structural injustices.<sup>11</sup> For Young, the degree of one’s responsibility to contribute to collective action varies with such factors as one’s power or capacity to change institutions, one’s privilege (the more one benefits from some injustice the greater one’s duty), one’s interest in having the situation changed, and one’s ability to generate collective action.<sup>12</sup> Even those who are victimized by structural injustices have a responsibility to join collective efforts to reduce or eliminate the injustices. This constitutes another difference between responsibility for justice and liability responsibility. Young explains: “On the liability model it is perverse to claim that victims are responsible, because the isolating logic of liability then absolves others of responsibility.” Young adds that the victims of structural injustices might even have a *heightened* responsibility to seek social change because “their interests...are most

---

<sup>8</sup> Young, “From Guilt to Solidarity,” 41.

<sup>9</sup> Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, 106.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-13.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 142-48.

acutely at stake” and they might have “a unique understanding of the nature of the problems and the likely effects of policies and actions proposed by others situated in more powerful and privileged positions.”<sup>13</sup>

In Young’s view, assignment of blame to contributors of structural injustices is typically not only a moral error of undeserved imputation of guilt, but it is also a political mistake because the language of blame, including accusations and expressions of indignation and resentment, is politically unproductive. She stresses that the language of blame makes people defensive, makes them focus on themselves or past events rather than engage in progressive action, leads to division and mistrust between the various parties involved in structural injustices, and invites resentment and even destructive rage among the victims of structural injustices and their supporters rather than leading to constructive political action aimed at fundamental changes.<sup>14</sup> Young writes: “There are...dangers of disorder among protestors who do go too far in righteous rage. The responsibility stance of those with a primary interest in undermining injustice is not to blame the powerful, the ones in whose interest it is to perpetuate the structures, but rather to publicly hold them to account.” And this involves “demanding on moral grounds that those with a particular power to alter the processes [of structural injustice] do so.”<sup>15</sup>

I think that Young is correct that ascriptions of blame for economic, social or political injustices may be politically unproductive, and, so, responsibility for justice should include careful reflection on the purpose and impact of blame ascriptions. We should, for example, guard against rash and inflated justifications of oppositional violence as punishment for blameworthy agents, as we can find, for example, in the work of Slavoj Žižek when he approvingly writes of the people of the favelas looting and burning supermarkets in rich neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro, that “they were like biblical locusts, the divine punishment for men’s sinful ways.”<sup>16</sup> A striking example of how such claims of “violence as just desert” can be politically divisive is the controversy that emerged in response to Ward Churchill’s statement, in “‘Some People Push Back’: On the Justice of Roosting Chickens,” that the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center was an “act of war” similar to the attack on the Pentagon and should not be viewed as the targeting of “innocent civilians” because most of the WTC occupants “formed a technocratic corps at the

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 113 and 145-46.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 113-18.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>16</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (New York, Picadore, 2008), 196 and 202.

very heart of America’s global empire—the ‘mighty engine of profit’ to which the military dimension of U.S. policy has always been enslaved—and they did so both willingly and knowingly.” Churchill adds: “If there was a better, more effective, or in fact any other way of visiting some penalty befitting their participation upon the little Eichmanns inhabiting the sterile sanctuary of the twin towers, I’d really be interested in hearing about it.”<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, Churchill’s “rage against empire” led him to equate the WTC to a military target, made him blind to the horrible deaths of many people in the WTC who were not working for global finance, and moved him to adopt the position of a “judge with biblical wrath” who asserts that the fate of global finance workers and executives was optimal within the constraints of what is practically possible.<sup>18</sup> Churchill nonetheless indirectly raises an important issue for our main topic: If we were to conclude that American citizens are to some extent blameworthy (“not innocent”) for the wars of aggression initiated by their government, would it then not be the case that we at least open the door towards weakening the claim that they have noncombatant immunity and are under all circumstances inappropriate targets of the party wrongfully under attack?

## **War and the Social Connection Model of Responsibility**

At first sight, then, it seems that Young’s social connection model of responsibility may be promising with regard to addressing the issue of the American people’s responsibility for their government’s wrongful military interventions. The basic parameters of the model applied to such interventions are that the American people should not be held liable for them, and, so, they are not blameworthy or guilty and have full noncombatant immunity. Still, they have a forward-looking responsibility to eliminate the social, economic, and political structural conditions that

---

<sup>17</sup> Ward Churchill, “‘Some People Push Back’: On the Justice of Roosting Chickens,” September, 2001. Posted at <http://www.kersplebedeb.com/mystuff/s11/churchill.html>. A modified version of the essay appeared in Ward Churchill, *On the Justice of Roosting Chickens* (Oakland: AK Press, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> Immediately after his remarks on 9/11 were much later widely reported in the mainstream media, Churchill posted on 02/1/2005 a clarification: “I am not a ‘defender’ of the September 11 attacks, but simply pointing out that if U.S. foreign policy results in massive death and destruction abroad, we cannot feign innocence when some of that destruction is returned. I have never said that people “should” engage in armed attacks on the United States, but that such attacks are a natural and unavoidable consequence of unlawful U.S. policy.” See <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines05/0201-05.htm>. This statement is difficult to square with the original statement in which Churchill clearly describes the perpetrators of 9/11 as meting out retributive justice.

give rise to unjust wars and, so, they must try to prevent future wars of aggression. Accordingly, the denial of liability for wars of aggression by their governments does not leave citizens as mere puppets of the state. Rather, as Lisa Rivera has argued in a recent article on the relevance of the social connection model for ascriptions of popular responsibility for wars of aggression, in Young's model the agency of citizens is still upheld because they are asked to resist U.S. wars of aggression and so "take responsibility for the conduct of their state."<sup>19</sup>

This application of the social connection model to questions of responsibility for the harms of wars of aggression, however, is not free of problems. First of all, it may be questioned whether unjust wars are a social phenomenon similar to the structural injustices covered by Young so that her social connection model of responsibility is actually applicable. Second, we may question whether liability ascriptions have such limited moral and political validity in the context of progressive politics as Young asserts, especially when the issue is responsibility for wars of aggression. Young might be right that many people who contribute to homelessness and sweatshops do not intend to bring about these harms and may even regret them, but wars seem different in this regard since those who order or execute them typically intend to inflict harm and death. And third, we may wonder whether Young is right in holding that her notion of responsibility for justice is not backward-looking and excludes the imputation of blame (and its correlated practices). As Martha Nussbaum notes in her Foreword to Young's *Responsibility for Justice*, the conceptual distinction between forward- and backward-looking responsibility is hard to sustain because "time marches on." In other words, we can look back and then wonder whether (once) forward-looking responsibilities were actually fulfilled. Nussbaum writes: "[I]f it is a general moral truth that citizens ought to monitor the institutions in which they live and be vigilant lest structural injustice occur within them, then I think it follows that they are culpably negligent if they do not shoulder that burden."<sup>20</sup>

Rivera addresses the first problem, noting that "one important way that war-making is analogous to the cases of global economic injustice that concern Young is that citizens, to varying degrees, are enabling conditions for wars to occur." She adds: "They are, in Young's

---

<sup>19</sup> Lisa Rivera, "Citizen Responsibility for War in Imperfect Democracies," *Dialogue* 48 (2009): 813-40, 829.

<sup>20</sup> Martha Nussbaum, "Foreword," *Responsibility for Justice*, xxi. Her essay also appeared (with minor differences) in *Dancing with Iris: The Philosophy of Iris Marion Young*, ed. Ann Ferguson & Mechthild Nagel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).



sense, participants in the system that makes the war [of aggression] possible. They provide the means to war through their tax dollars and their labor. They also—willingly or not—provide the ideological pretext for war. The war is waged in their name.”<sup>21</sup> In my view, there is much truth in Rivera’s comments. The American people sustain a “war machine” at the foundation of wrongful U.S. interventions. Obviously, the Iraq war would not have occurred were it not for the U.S. global military presence, its “empire of bases,” its militarized foreign policy, its war economy, its culture industry of glorifying military might and violence, and its political process corrupted by the military industrial complex. Thus it becomes the responsibility of American citizens not only to resist wars of aggression made possible by the “war machine” but also seek to eliminate the war machine itself and its inherent harms, such as its waste of resources, its huge opportunity costs, its aggressive sales of weapons across the globe, and its support of oppressive regimes abroad.

A merit of the social connection model, then, is that it broadens and deepens the responsibility of American citizens for their wars. We live in a time in which many citizens are alienated from their wars, holding that wars are primarily the responsibility of those who fight the wars and order their execution. The emergence of the volunteer army is a major enabling factor of alienated war,<sup>22</sup> as is the reduction in American casualties due to “virtual warfare.” Moreover, the government promotes alienated war because in a climate where the people are distant from war it becomes easier to continue wars and initiate new ones. Increasingly, wartime in the United States is normalized and even experienced and presented as peacetime.<sup>23</sup> So, in a time of drone warfare and continued legal emergency warranted by war, President Barack Obama proclaimed, for example, in his Second Inaugural Address, presumably on basis of his ending of the war in Iraq and his promise to end the war in Afghanistan, that “We, the people, still believe that enduring security and lasting peace do not require perpetual war.” Following the social connection model of responsibility, however, accepting Obama’s words here is an ideological “reproduction” of war, and numerous daily actions performed by Americans, including the paying of taxes, the production and development of weapons and ammunitions, the

---

<sup>21</sup> Rivera, “Citizen Responsibility for War in Imperfect Democracies,” 833.

<sup>22</sup> See Cheyney Ryan, *The Chickenhawk Syndrome: War, Sacrifice, and Personal Responsibility* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> See Mary L. Dudziak, *WarTime: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

culture of violence, and the maintenance of the “empire of bases,” similarly sustain the war system and thus enable wars of aggression. Accordingly, “We, the people” cannot disown our wars.

Relatedly, a merit of the social connection model is that it suggests that just war theory needs to be broadened beyond *jus ad bellum* (just initiation of war) and *jus in bello* (just conduct in war). The focus on the “war system” at the root of unjust wars brings attention to the fact that there must be *jus ante bellum* (justice before war) in order for there to be *jus ad bellum*. In synopsis, I hold that *jus ante bellum*, or what also may be called “just military preparedness,” consists of such requirements as that the military should treat and educate soldiers as morally competent agents with the right to selective refusal and that the defense machinery is focused on basic human rights protection only (say, as opposed to our present “global power projection”). The latter requires arms reduction and precludes nuclear weapons, the weaponization of space, and global military presence. Other requirements are that foreign policy prioritizes nonviolent ways of preventing threats (e.g., poverty reduction, democracy promotion, diplomacy, strengthening and modifying the United Nations) and that the defense budget is determined through an open debate and democratic decision-making.<sup>24</sup> Thus we may see the responsibility of American citizens to address unjust wars fought in their name as including the responsibility to bring about “just military preparedness.”

A final merit of Young’s social connection model here is that it encourages cross-border protest and action, not unlike the global organizing and action against sweatshops. The “empire of bases” concerns people across the globe, and they must seek to push back this “empire” for the sake of its inherent wrongs and as an enabling factor of unjust wars. This struggle requires cooperation between local groups in different countries, including the United States. Some examples are the successful resistance to U.S. military training on Vieques, Puerto Rico, the ongoing struggle against the U.S. military occupation in Okinawa, Japan, and the very recent

---

<sup>24</sup> For an elaboration of the requirements or principles of just military preparedness, see my essays: “Just Military Preparedness, U.S. Military Hegemony, and Contingency Planning for Intervention in Sudan: A Reply to Lango and Patterson,” *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 24.2 (2010): 135-52; “From Hiroshima to Baghdad: Military Hegemony versus Just Military Preparedness,” in *Philosophy after Hiroshima*, ed. Edward Demenchonok (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2010); “Barack Obama, Resort to Force, and U.S. Military Hegemony,” *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 23/1 (2009): 95-104; and, “Questioning the Resort to U.S. Hegemonic Military Force,” in *The Moral dimensions of asymmetrical warfare: Counter-terrorism, western values, military ethics*, ed. Ted van Baarda and Desirée Verweij (Leiden and Boston: Brill Academic Publishers/Martinus Nijhoff, 2009).

struggle of the people of Gangjeong village, Jeju Island, South Korea, against the building of a naval base by their government for U.S. warships.<sup>25</sup>

## **Liability Responsibility and War**

Viewing the “war machine” as a structural injustice does not preclude blaming persons or organizations for their involvement in the continuation of this “war machine.” We should, for example, blame defense corporations for pushing needless weapon systems and routinely accruing huge cost overruns. Also, we should hold accountable those who use the revolving door from legislator or military officer to weapon industry lobbyist. Young seems to understate the liability of specific (powerful) individuals and organizations, presumably because she is concerned to motivate citizens participating in structural injustices to take on responsibility for changing these structures and she worries that “finger pointing” may lead them to conclude that they need not act since others are at fault. This worry is not misguided, but exposure of corporate corruption and greed and the dishonesty of corporate executives might also motivate people to seek to eliminate structural injustices, and silence concerning such moral failings might contribute to the continuation of these injustices. At any rate, once the issue is unjust war, rather than economic injustices, liability ascriptions become more important. Only war involves a deliberate decision to mobilize military force against some political group, while economic injustices may have unintended or unforeseen victims resulting from many institutional and individual decisions. The harms of war are also generally more immediate, devastating, and horrifying than the harms of economic oppression and exclusion embedded in Young’s cases of structural injustice. Accordingly, heightened moral scrutiny is warranted on all sides, and, so, blame ascriptions gain in currency.

Surely, we should blame the George W. Bush administration for initiating war against Iraq under the pretext that Iraq was developing WMD and supporting al-Qaeda. Here it should be noted that political protest is often infused with blame; protest is not merely an expression of disagreement about some policy, but it also often involves blame reactions with regard to the

---

<sup>25</sup> The first two struggles are discussed in *The Bases of Empire: The Global Struggle against U.S. Military Posts*, ed. Catherine Lutz (New York: New York University Press, 2009). The Global Network against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space is involved in the resistance on Jeju Island and details of this unfolding struggle can be found at its website <http://www.space4peace.org/>.

moral attitudes of those who set the policy. The attitudes may include indifference or even scorn with regard to democratic decision-making, disrespect of opposed opinions, disregard of the public interest, blindness or indifference to human suffering, etc. A vivid example of such a blame reaction was a huge sign with FUCK YOU BUSH during the January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2003, demonstration in Washington, D.C., against the pending war against Iraq.<sup>26</sup> Blaming prevents the normalization of wrongful conduct and ceasing to blame may involve a failure to stand up for one's values and may lead to complicity in wrongdoing. And so we should strongly condemn the Bush administration's practices of torture, secret prisons, and extraordinary renditions and hold those who initiated, officially legitimized, and executed those practices morally and legally accountable. And, arguably, some moral blame was appropriate with regard to soldiers who kept on fighting this war after its deceptive origin and all the horrors it unleashed were clear for all to see. Admittedly, the approach of "support our troops, bring them home" might have been in some ways politically smart, but a serious dialogue concerning the culpability of serving in Iraq might have been better in terms of promoting a morally competent military in the long run and in ending the public's turning a blind eye to the massive suffering of the Iraqi people.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, we should protest, for example, that veterans receive inadequate and often-long delayed mental health treatment.

The Obama administration's failure to prosecute anyone involved in the war crimes of the Bush administration shows the limited validity of Young's argument that blame ascriptions should be avoided because they are politically divisive and unproductive. No doubt, the muted condemnation of the Obama administration in this regard was partly motivated by the fear that this would be divisive and weaken the new administration. Similarly, opposition has been subdued to the Obama administration's acceptance of most of the policies and laws of the

---

<sup>26</sup> Personal recollection. My comments here have benefited from Angela M. Smith's short and interesting exploration of blaming in general as a way of protesting the objectionable moral claims implicit in the conduct of the blameworthy person. See her "Moral Blame and Moral Protest," in Coates and Tognazzini, eds., *Blame*, Chapter 2. No doubt, one must be cautious with expressions of blame and seek to avoid fueling destructive rage among fellow protestors or counter protestors. In my view, the sign did not cross the line in the particular context. Young rightly cautions against "righteous rage," but wrongly concludes (see the cited passage referenced in note 15, above) that we should not blame "the powerful."

<sup>27</sup> I hold that soldiers should not be held legally liable for fighting their wars as long as they do not commit *jus in bello* crimes, but the issue here is moral culpability. The reason that moral liability at present should not be a ground for legal liability is that we lack adequate international institutions for the determination of wrongful wars (in *jus ad bellum* terms) and the prosecution of soldiers who would then fight in such wrongful wars. I elaborate these points in "Questioning Combatant's Privilege in Unjust Wars," forthcoming in the Proceedings of Concerned Philosophers for Peace, Rodopi Press.

“homeland security state” of the prior administration, leading a recent critic to proclaim that “the election of Barack Obama may stand as one of the single most devastating events in our history for civil liberties.”<sup>28</sup>

So what about the responsibility of the American people for the war against Iraq? Should we approach it only in terms of forward looking responsibility, or are ascriptions of blame also appropriate here? It seems hard to deny that the American people can be blamed for the continuation of the Iraq war by re-electing George W. Bush. While a case can be made that the American people were misled in 2003 concerning the dangers posed by Iraq and had the excuse that even much more widespread opposition to the war would not have prevented it, these mitigating conditions were no longer in place in 2004, and a vote for John Kerry would have shortened the war. But granted that those who voted for Bush in 2004 share some liability for the horrors that befell the Iraqi population, what purpose is served by blame ascriptions in this context?<sup>29</sup> Most Americans now think that the war was a mistake, and it seems important that the mistake is not simply placed in the hands of the Bush administration. We should insist that people regret their vote, become ashamed of what was done in their name, and then we may hope that they vote more carefully in the future, demand more independent news media, and engage more broadly in transformative action. Again, Young is correct that liability ascriptions may have a “singling-out” impact (“the war was the fault of the Bush administration only”), but liability ascriptions may also be applied to large political collectives and so avoid that the many feel exonerated. In fact, a risk of her forward-looking conception of responsibility is that the shameful past is too easily forgotten, so that an incentive is taken away to shape a better future or that the scope of needed change is underestimated.

Another purpose of liability ascriptions is to make the case for compensation or rectification. This demand can be made by members of the community at fault, or the victims may make the demand. This suggests another debatable aspect of Young’s analysis of blame in progressive politics. Her view that blame should be sidestepped for the sake of effective action is based on approaching the victims of structural injustices as participants only. In other words,

---

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Turley, “Obama gives torture a pass,” October 2, 2011, <http://www.newsday.com>. A similar criticism can be found in Jeremy Scahill, *Dirty Wars* (New York: Nations Book, 2013), 516ff.

<sup>29</sup> In my view, culpability of the American people with regard to the Iraqi people goes back earlier in time. With regard to the devastating economic sanctions in the 1990s (leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of children), most people were culpably ignorant or simply rationalized away any responsibility by placing the responsibility solely on the Saddam Hussein regime.

what she does not pay adequate attention to is the appropriateness of reactive attitudes, such as anger and indignation, of the victims *qua* victims. Most definitely, this is an error in the context of collective liability for unjust wars; for it is not up to us to tell Iraqi war victims to set aside moral anger against the American people because it might be divisive and not be politically productive. Reactive attitudes are important in maintaining the self-worth of the members of the community under attack and in upholding the dignity of its victims. Moreover, liability ascriptions are pivotal in reconciliation processes.

In a word, I think that we should be less hesitant than Young to embrace liability ascriptions for social harm, especially in the context of war. To be sure, blame is fed by one's morality, and a flawed morality leads to misplaced blame. A misguided analysis of causal responsibility will have the same impact. And a lack of temperance, moreover, may turn indignation into rage and protest into indiscriminate violence. But the solution here is not to throw out blame, but to contest the causal analysis, to challenge the morality, and to organize disciplined collective action. In my view, the greatest errors of Žižek and, especially, Churchill are, however, not their inflated liability ascriptions or even their indiscriminate assignment of moral responsibility or seeming rush to judgment, but their embrace of political violence as retributive punishment or even divine violence. The result is that violence is no longer judged in terms of whether it is proportionate, effectively serves a political purpose, and is adequately discriminate.<sup>30</sup> It is in similar terms that we must defend the notion of civilian immunity. In fact, it seems that it is not uncommon that some civilians are more blameworthy for wars of aggression than many of the combatants fighting their wars, especially conscripted combatants who might even oppose the war, but typically only counter-violence against combatants can be justified because it is necessary for, and proportionate to, the just cause of resort to force and can be executed fairly discriminately.<sup>31</sup> Alternatively, the possibility that noncombatants may at times be liable to attack can be more definitely excluded by arguing that posing (in some sense willingly) a clear threat is a necessary and sufficient condition for liability to attack in the context of war.

---

<sup>30</sup> For an elaboration of these criticisms, see my "On the Violence of Systemic Violence: A Critique of Slavoj Žižek," *Radical Philosophy Review* 15.2 (2012): 33-51.

<sup>31</sup> This is roughly how Jeff McMahan argues for noncombatant immunity under most conditions. See *Killing in War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), chapter V, section 4.

## Re-conceptualizing the Social Connection Model of Responsibility

The third problem of Young's understanding of responsibility for justice Nussbaum's contention that we may hold liable or "culpable negligent" those who fail to fulfill their "social connection" responsibility—poses, in my view, the greatest challenge to Young's view. At one point, Young seems to acknowledge the appropriateness of such a retrospective perspective in the context of responsibility for justice, arguing that even though "we should not be blamed or found at fault for what we do to try to rectify [structural] injustice, even if we do not succeed," it is still the case that "we can and should be criticized for not taking action, not taking enough action, taking ineffective action, or taking action that is counterproductive."<sup>32</sup> Regrettably, Young does not explicate the distinction she draws here between blame and criticism. I will soon argue that criticism is best understood as a mild form of blame; what should be noted at present is that her view that criticism is an appropriate response to failing to execute responsibility for justice is inconsistent with her claim that this responsibility is prospective and so distinctive from retroactive liability responsibility. After all, the criticism involves holding someone liable (at fault) for failing to act or acting inadequately and the liability then justifies the response of criticism.<sup>33</sup> Granted, the liability here is not for directly causing harm, but rather for failing to have done anything to prevent its continued occurrence. But liability ascriptions commonly take on this form. For example, we hold Trudy liable for not throwing a lifeline to Peter, who accidentally fell into the pool and, lacking swimming skills, then drowned, even though Trudy did not cause his death. Perhaps if Young would have attempted to integrate her comment about the appropriateness of criticism into her theoretical explication of responsibility for justice, she would have reassessed her view that this responsibility is not backward-looking.

Going beyond Nussbaum's analysis,<sup>34</sup> I think that Young's basic theoretical error is that she conceives of the processes of assigning responsibility, which is a prospective undertaking,

---

<sup>32</sup> Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, 143-44.

<sup>33</sup> A similar inconsistency is to be found when Young first claims that the correct approach is not "to blame the powerful, the ones in whose interest it is to perpetuate the structures, but rather to publicly hold them to account," and then continues to argue that the powerful sometimes "can be pressured and shamed to do something different." See *ibid.* 149. The source of shame seems the liability (guilt) of having failed to act on the responsibility for justice.

<sup>34</sup> An anonymous reviewer wondered how my analysis here differs from Nussbaum's critical comments. In a word, Nussbaum does not explain how Young might have arrived at her notion of two types of

and the backward-looking process of determining who has failed in their responsibility and so is liable for some response, such as blame or punishment, in terms of two different types of responsibility, liability responsibility and forward-looking responsibility as instantiated by her social connection model. What is new about Young's view is not that she offers a new type of responsibility, "prospective responsibility," but rather that she articulates a new *ground* for holding people responsible. Trudy (in the example above) has a prospective responsibility of "easy rescue," and failing this responsibility, she deserves blame. Liability ascriptions assume that we have already assigned prospective responsibility, most generally the duty not to directly cause harm. We assign this responsibility to individuals as well as to groups of various sorts, such as political communities. Many people also think that we have a general individual duty to prevent harm if we can do so without placing a serious burden or risk upon ourselves, i.e., an individual duty of easy rescue.<sup>35</sup> And, much more controversially, Young adds to this that we have a responsibility to address harms to which we are "socially connected," and, so, what she is arguing for is a considerable expansion of the scope of harms for which we are responsible. But pace Young, once we have concluded that we are indeed responsible for structural harms as participants of structural injustices, we can and should ask with regard to this responsibility the same question we ask in general with regard to responsibility for harm: what kind of response is appropriate if a person fails to take on the responsibility for justice?

One answer could be that no response at all should be expressed for the pragmatic reasons that Young offers against blaming people who participate in structural injustices: it is divisive, makes us focus on the past rather than the future, etc. The answer has merit, but within limits: if it is never brought to our attention that our inaction is a moral fault of some sort, then we take a crucial incentive away to change ourselves and try harder to take on our responsibilities.<sup>36</sup> Again, Young indirectly grants the point by maintaining that for the sake of promoting action for justice we may criticize people. Another answer is that any response would

---

responsibility nor does she maintain that what is new about Young's conception is that she offers a new ground for responsibility (as I argue in what follows). Finally, Nussbaum does not try to explicate Young's claim (made in passing) that we should criticize those who fail to take on responsibility for justice rather than blame them.

<sup>35</sup> The concern here is the responsibilities that we have as members of society or human beings as such rather than our specific role-responsibilities. We have many role-responsibilities related to our jobs, our status as parents, etc. These responsibilities articulate forward-looking duties and lead to backward-looking liability claims when we fail to fulfill them adequately.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Nussbaum, "Foreword," *Responsibility for Justice*, xxii-xxiii.



be inappropriate because there are always mitigating conditions sufficiently strong to conclude that it would not be appropriate to ascribe liability or culpability. Obviously, this response cannot be correct because it would nullify that we have a responsibility to change structural injustices in the first place (“ought” implies “can”).

In my view, there is much to be said in favor of Young’s claim that the proper response to those who fail to act on responsibility for justice is criticism rather than blame, provided that her claim is explored in ways that both go beyond her understanding of blame and responsibility and partly refute it. First, we may interpret criticism as a milder form of blaming than the kind of blaming that Young typically argues against as counterproductive to progressive collective action, notably, blaming as involving “moral anger” (indignation, resentment). Criticism may be an encouragement to set aside moments of distraction, weakness of will, indecision, hopelessness, and the like, and increase or refocus one’s determination to fulfill one’s responsibility, while moral anger cuts more deeply into the blamed person, as it were, suggesting that the target of blame displays serious moral failing, a lack of empathy, selfishness, greed, etc. in the given situation, and perhaps even has a character flaw. Second, criticism rather than blame as moral anger seems appropriate with regard to most participants of structural injustice who fail to address or address adequately the injustice because of mitigating conditions. For most participants of structural injustice, it is difficult to see how they can effectively make a difference in eliminating the injustices. Consumers may individually refuse to buy some sweatshop products, but this is not going to solve the problem and even may harm the workers in sweatshops (layoffs, lower wages, etc.). Or, someone may refuse to buy a condo in a condo complex that has been built where there were once low-income apartments, but this refusal will not solve the problem of homelessness. What is required is collective action, and how effective collective action can take shape is often unclear or subject to considerable differences of opinion. Third, even though criticism seems typically appropriate for failures of responsibility for justice, the mitigating conditions of responsibility for justice hardly apply to those Young describes as the “powerful” who have a major interest in continuing structural injustice. Accordingly, moral anger or a strong rebuke rather than criticism may be appropriate with regard to the powerful when they fail to take on their responsibility for justice. Fourth, Young seems to err in viewing criticism not as an expression of blaming. The agent who engages in criticism or expresses moral anger finds in either case that someone was at fault and has the desire that the fault would not

have occurred. Blaming is acting on this desire, and so involves affirming through moral anger or criticism one's commitment to the standards that have been violated by the blamed person. Note that my disagreement with Young is not merely verbal. Surely, Young may wish to reserve the term "blame" for stronger forms of blame such moral anger, and so not call criticism a form of blame, but the crucial issue is that her understanding of responsibility for justice does not allow one to explicate criticism as a practice similar to blaming (with its retrospective assignment of fault, etc.).

To further illustrate how criticism rather than blame in a strong sense is appropriate with regard to the failure to act in the context of structural injustice, consider again the U.S. "war machine" as structural injustice. The project of American global military hegemony is so widely accepted and deeply entrenched in our political, economic, cultural, and educational institutions that it is hard to imagine collective agents that might effectively change it. To be sure, it is not difficult to articulate steps that should be taken to get us away from this state of affairs—for example, Chalmers Johnson and Rachel Maddows have recently outlined such steps,<sup>37</sup>—but how to create the collective agents that may execute such steps is harder to tell. The Washington establishment is thoroughly committed to the "war machine," and so the mainstream political process offers little hope. Protest movements have had victories in some instances, but overall little success in fundamentally challenging the American military project. Wars have been lost or have met unanticipated obstacles, but the Pentagon has adjusted its "war machine," and its propaganda of selling war and its own existence have increasingly become more sophisticated. The American people tend to tire of long-lasting wars (Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan), but their memory span seems rather short, and soon the war option can be put back on the table.<sup>38</sup> In brief, it is an ongoing task of radical intellectuals and activists to imagine effective collective agents of change here, but in light of the enormity of this task, it seems more appropriate to criticize

---

<sup>37</sup> Chalmers Johnson, "Ten Steps toward Liquidating the Empire," in his *Dismantling the Empire: America's Last Best Hope* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010), 194-96; and Rachel Maddow, *Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012), 249-51, where she offers a "to-do list" of eight points. Johnson is rather somber about the prospect of a voluntary dismantling of empire and thinks that "overstretch and insolvency" ("Ten Steps," *ibid.*, 8) will force America to change direction.

<sup>38</sup> Most recently, this tiredness seems to have played a role in the popular opposition to Obama's proposal to bomb Syria in response to its government's use of chemical weapons, but it remains to be seen whether this opposition will lead to any collective action aimed at bringing about structural changes of the "war machine."

people who fail to act or act insufficiently than to blame them in a strong sense. Still, the stronger form of blame might be appropriate with regard to individuals who display indifference with respect to the harms of structural injustices. It also seems appropriate with regard to individuals who, according to Young, we should hold publicly accountable (rather than blameworthy): individuals whose institutional position gives them considerable room for affecting change but opt for not doing so since the status quo benefits them.

In Chapter Six of her *Responsibility for Justice*, Young discusses some common strategies of “avoiding responsibility,” and these underline that criticism rather than strong blame is generally the appropriate response to the failure to take on responsibility for justice. These strategies articulate how people come to conclude that they have no responsibility to remedy injustices. For example, they deny connection to structural harm, or they reify social relations and their harms as inevitable (“it is the market”), or they argue that the demands of taking care of those close to them do not leave room for political action. Young writes: “The question easily arises...whether persons who use the above strategies to avoid taking responsibility shouldn’t be blamed or faulted for doing so.” And her answer is that we may not blame in this context: “If practices of blaming do distinguish those more or less morally righteous, and if the excuses I have articulated are common, then it seems inappropriate to level blame at persons who voice these excuses.”<sup>39</sup> I find this argument erroneous. Blame need not necessarily fall on a select few only and may be placed on many individuals or large collectives. And it is not the mere common occurrence of excuses that makes them adequate mitigating conditions; at most their common occurrence may signal that the excuses are valid. In my view, the strategies of avoiding responsibility may contain clear elements of culpable ignorance and rationalization,<sup>40</sup> but it is also true that responsibility for justice pulls from many directions and the demands of everyday life are often overwhelming, which in itself might be a structural harm. And so, again, criticism rather than strong blame may be the right response when we call, typically with firm moral conviction but great uncertainty concerning success, people on the sidelines to collective action.

Finally, moral responsibility ascriptions play a central and pervasive role in our daily lives in the form of such responses as moral anger, finger pointing, accusations, reproach,

---

<sup>39</sup> Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, 170.

<sup>40</sup> We should be careful not to conflate difference of opinion and culpable ignorance and rationalization. Denial of connection to structural harm might be a question of difference of opinion only and moral criticism would then be misplaced. In practice, it is often hard to draw a distinction here.

criticism, and calling for punishment. The left commonly expresses such responses in its political actions and discourse, perhaps more emphatically so than those operating in the mainstream precisely because left politics is at the margin. It is a credit of Young's work that she interrogates the role of blaming practices in the context of progressive politics. I have questioned to some extent her approach as too restrictive, but I think that she is correct in holding that part of our responsibility for justice is to take responsibility for our blaming responses. And, generally, both for pragmatic and moral reasons, we should criticize rather than strongly blame those committed to social justice who have responses that may not serve, in our eyes, collective action and transformative discourse.