



4-15-1994

[Book Review] *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Iris Marion Young. Princeton University Press, 1990. *Feminism and the Women's Movement*. Barbara Ryan. Routledge, 1992. *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*. Lawrence Grossberg. Routledge, 1992.

Derek R. Haggard

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.03.18>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#).



Recommended Citation

Haggard, Derek R. (1994) "[Book Review] *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Iris Marion Young. Princeton University Press, 1990. *Feminism and the Women's Movement*. Barbara Ryan. Routledge, 1992. *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*. Lawrence Grossberg. Routledge, 1992.," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 3, Article 18.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.03.18>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol3/iss1/18>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Questions about the journal can be sent to disclosurejournal@gmail.com

Justice and the Politics of Difference

Iris Marion Young

Princeton University Press, 1990

Feminism and the Women's Movement

Barbara Ryan

Routledge, 1992

We Gotta Get Out of This Place:

Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture

Lawrence Grossberg

Routledge, 1992

Reviewed by Derek R. Haggard

Whereas the liberal conception of democracy has developed within a largely institutional or legal context, it would seem that western societies are increasingly willing to embrace a significantly more activist democratic ideal. Specifically, a historically meaningful notion of "democracy" demands a pluralist articulation of the everyday experiences of social groups. Since modernization, western Europe has witnessed a perplexing variety of social movements aiming at such articulation as well as substantial cultural reform. These movements offer a broad critique of contemporary western society.

The new social movements challenge basic assumptions of "mainstream" culture: matters relating to sexism, racism, family structure, leisure, diet, violence, poverty, and so on. Tokens of high modernity, these movements developed rapidly in the 1890s (especially in Germany) and have served to undermine mainstream political agendas, their own bourgeois origins notwithstanding. The latest burst of activism during the 1960s (as well as their persistence during the conservative 1980s) has elicited a great deal of controversy within the academy: attracting attention of both positivist social science as well as continental theorists.

Setting aside the need to revamp inadequate notions of liberal pluralism, the focus of this review essay concerns Marxism. Specifically, it introduces the impact of social movements and cultural studies upon the project of developing a critical democratic theory of late capitalist society, as seen in three recent and potentially important books: *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990) by Iris Marion Young; *Feminism and the Women's Movement* (1992) by Barbara Ryan; and *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* (1992) by Lawrence Grossberg. Taken together, these three books address an intersection of current debates regarding cultural diversity, political activism, and the expansion of postmodern sensi-

bilities.

Young's book examines an important shift in American political thought in which social groups based on personal identity rather than economic interest have begun to demand cultural and political representation. To this extent, Young's book serves as perhaps the best attempt thus far at coming to terms with the appreciation of (postmodern) notions of "difference" within the context of a (still Marxist) critical theory. Nevertheless, Young's book does not represent a balancing act; rather, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* clearly sides with French social theory and its resistance to totalizing categories rather than with traditional critical theory and its continued reliance on the Enlightenment ideal of the "public sphere."

Young, however, tries to remain true to certain methods and perspectives of the Frankfurt school, even as she rejects its particular vision of democratic public space. Specifically, she accepts the basic Marxist tenet that all theory is historically situated; moreover, she concurs with Habermas's accounts of late capitalism as well as his theory of communicative action: herein lies a foundation of her own understanding of justice. On the other hand, she conceives of her project as "a critique of unifying discourse" (7). Such discourse, in her opinion, informs contemporary mainstream myths of impartiality, the "general good," and community.

Moreover, she places her work in direct contrast to the work of John Rawls and argues that the very norm of justice is at stake. Simply put, she maintains that her conception of justice privileges doing instead of having, oppression rather than distribution. Oppression receives substantial treatment in chapter two, defined in terms of five aspects: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.

Young's articulation of the components of oppression represents the major contribution of her work. Specifically, post-Marxist theory has for too long drifted between ahistorical notions of "alienated exploitation" and "hegemony," the efforts of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau notwithstanding. This has, in turn, led to unnecessary confusion regarding the relationships between academic theorizing, grass-roots organizing, and the cultural diversity movement. In short, this refers to the inadequately contextualized notion of oppression put forth by critical theorists. Young's five aspects, then, attempt such a historic contextualization, borrowing heavily from a postmodern interpretation of recent social movements and appreciation of cultural differences.

In other words, Young refuses to present a theory of justice; rather, she describes the current and historic meaning of injustice through economic exploitation, political marginalization, and so on. What she seeks concerns a

genuine social equality which affirms and appreciates group differences. Totalizing ideals, be they individualistic, legalistic, or communitarian, are discarded. Moreover, her prescriptions include an abandonment of (possibly agrarian or romantic) notions of community space or public sphere in favor of a renewed appreciation for the potentials of urban life; presumably, of course, spaces exist within cities for smaller identity-communities.

Regardless of one's opinion of Young's analysis and proposals, her work and the debates it has generated potentially signify an important development in American critical theory. For Marxists, the proliferation of new social movements has demonstrated the need for serious adjustments to traditional theory. Specifically, western Marxism has failed to maintain theoretic focus on the initiators of subjects of substantive political change. Of course, orthodox Marxism insists on the primacy of a large industrial working class, electrified by an economic crisis. The Frankfurt school generally dispensed with this proletariat, yet as a whole has failed to specify its replacement.

Young, however, seems willing to take the new social movements much more seriously: "In these movements I locate the social base of a conception of justice that seeks to reduce and eliminate domination and oppression (67). Furthermore, one may understand her position of social movements within the context of a theory of democracy. Whereas recent liberal ideology has persistently conceived of democracy as a procedure made available to free individuals, an emancipatory or critical perspective demands the cultural and political acceptance of groups. Note, however, that this does not signify a devolution of authority to such groups; merely their substantial participation in politicized policy formation is encouraged.

Young's argument is convincing. Interestingly, she sets aside the academic debates regarding the extent to which the achievement of public unity is possible, much less desirable. These debates inform the works of Chantal Mouffe and Jürgen Habermas. Rather, since Young (ever the American pragmatist!) argues that group oppression and differences constitute social facts, denying the oppression of others (based on gender, race, sexuality, etc.) based on an appeal to the normative public sphere has "oppressive consequences" (164). Of course, a major component of groups' differences derives from their very marginalization. One can then conceivably argue that, once oppression ceases, Habermas's public sphere can develop. Until then, however, the "particular histories and traditions" will reproduce difference (p. 164).

Indeed, the general refusal of American legal tradition to recognize the existence of social groups has significantly hindered democracy as practiced in the United States. One might argue that the suspicion felt by many progressive activists towards American democracy derives not from any inherent flaw in

the concept of "public sphere"; rather, a liberal-legalist ideology consistently hinders the activity of this democracy, causing many to abandon the Enlightenment project altogether. To this extent, Young's call for the institutional recognition of oppressed groups demands a cultural and economic corporatism that will, in the long run, revitalize the (unifying) public sphere.

Given Young's analysis, it would seem important to examine in new light the histories of those movements claiming to represent oppressed groups: such stories would try to compensate for the failures of liberal democracy. This is the undertaking of Barbara Ryan, whose new book *Feminism and the Women's Movement* addresses the ideological evolution of American feminism as seen in its organizational dynamics. Ryan adopts the so-called "resource mobilization" approach and her book can be seen in terms of working within this theoretical field while trying to account for ideology.

Specifically, the works of McCarthy and Zald placed resource mobilization theory at the forefront of approaches to the study of new social movements. Within this perspective, discontent and conflict are assumed to exist just beneath the surface of social life; their realization depends on the creation of "organizational infrastructures" to mobilize such discontent. To this extent, "resources" refer here not merely to publicity and money, but more importantly to the cultivation of social awareness and activism. Thus, the resource mobilization approach has been particularly successful in explicating the relationships between different types of strategies and their outcomes, as well as explaining why certain organizations or movements structure themselves as they do.

In *Feminism and the Women's Movement*, Ryan's goal seems to be a history of women's activism in the United States with emphasis on the role ideology has played within the organizational or infrastructural dynamics. This she attempts through a series of literature reviews and interviews with forty-four activists in Illinois. Chapters one and two present a rather straightforward narrative of first-wave feminism, concentrating on the leadership of suffrage organizations. The remainder of the book focuses on the evolving fortunes of second wave feminism.¹

The book's subtitle suggests that the evolution of second-wave feminism will be described in terms of ideology. Indeed, it would seem that an exploration of the relationships between activists' "resources" and ideology is in order. However, Ryan's goal eludes her, and her attempt to bridge the gap between resource mobilization and ideology critique almost results in the appropriation of the concept of "ideology" under an instrumentalist logic. Ideology, in other words, becomes only another mobilizing resource at the disposal of liberal interest groups (54). In any case, Ryan successfully catalogues the political

failures of the contemporary feminist movement, and finally concludes (rather predictably) that "the re-emergence of identity divisions in the 1980s points to the need for a more inclusive feminism" (154).

Whereas Ryan's methodology allows for an adequate conception of coalitional politics, it conceives of ideology in a completely inadequate fashion. In particular, ideology receives an interpretation that is simplistic at best and instrumentalist at worst. Too often in Ryan's book one gets the impression that great things for women could have been accomplished, had it not been for trouble-making "ideological purists" who worked to divide the otherwise united front of women.

Specifically, Ryan seems to work from the assumption that women wander aimlessly from the everyday world of oppression to the world of activism without benefit of any ideology other than feminist activism: these women, apparently, join groups that are "moderate enough" to accept the liberal pluralist framework as a given (32). To this extent, Ryan's position implies that the feminist agenda is pursued by groups promoting an agenda of common sense rather than (academic or elitist) ideologies. Welfare liberalism, then, informs Ryan's conception of common sense.

Such reasoning leads one to suspect that Ryan has fallen victim to mainstream ideology and that she does not understand completely the greater importance of feminism and the cultural critique it offers. Feminism does not merely use activism to pursue "the women's agenda" (as if half of humanity could have a single agenda). Rather, feminism must ultimately be an ideology of economic, political, cultural, and personal empowerment. To this extent, ideology concerns not "activism" in the abstract; it concerns purposeful activism guided by historical and political awareness. Moreover, this project is tricky and is bound to be associated with debate and controversy, especially among feminists themselves. Naturally, esoteric debates hinder progressive politics. However, it is simply not helpful to equate the progress of feminism with, for example, the fund-raising capacity of liberal interest groups.

Chapter four illustrates some of these problems. In this section Ryan describes the initial impact of lesbian activists on feminism in the early 1970s. The lesbian movement argued, in effect, that the repression of sexuality constituted an important aspect of patriarchy. Ryan's instrumentalism, however, forces one to interpret the articulation of lesbianism as an "assault" on the feminist movement made possible by "heterosexual women's passivity" (51). Of course, from the perspective of interest group liberalism and political campaigning, lesbianism did indeed hinder the early feminist movement. The purpose of women's activism, however, should not be favorable press in a sexist society; rather, a full exploration of power and oppression (in this case as

revealed by lesbian activists) must be an aim of progressive politics.

To this extent, Ryan's approach masks positivist instrumentalism with concern for pragmatic political action. Nevertheless, Ryan at least succeeds in avoiding the celebration of self-withdrawal that characterizes much so-called new age feminism. "Consciousness raising created a sense of unity and strength; however, after engaging in it for some time, many women felt the need to 'do something'" (p. 47). However, Ryan accepts an ideologically-informed feminist movement only because new ideas may potentially focus attention on a single issue of mobilization. In other words, ideas that qualify as "mobilizing resources" can be accepted as feminist ideology; ideas that provoke controversy within feminism qualify as academic theory devoid of usefulness (p. 60-2).

In summary, Ryan persistently offers an apology for the domination of women's groups by middle-class white women and often explains the obstacles to women's liberation in terms of divisions within the feminist community. Here she not only underestimates the importance of dissent within the new social movements but also the role of conservative forces from society at-large in hindering the women's movement. Indeed, this seems symptomatic of a greater problem in Ryan's work in which activism and ideology are not historically contextualized. It would seem, then, that the study of social movements must recognize the need for a broader (Marxist) theory in order to relate such movements and their activist representatives to broader historic and cultural trends.

Such interconnections serve as the focus of Lawrence Grossberg's book *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (1992), which attempts to ground cultural studies firmly in political theory. A major contribution of the Frankfurt school concerns a concept of "culture" that transcends earlier notions signifying elite aesthetics. Whereas a subtle yet persistent mandarinism informs the early works of neo-Marxism, Adorno and his successors did succeed in identifying artifacts of popular culture as legitimate areas for social research.

Moreover, the neo-Marxists' attempt to reveal ideological assumptions within popular culture and mass-produced art (their elitism notwithstanding) has contributed to more recent post-structuralist projects. To this extent, Adorno's elitism has been, perhaps, overstated. In any case, the contemporary analysis of popular culture in North America has grown to such proportions that its practice has become rather haphazard. Grossberg's project in this book, then, is to provide direction for cultural studies as he reaffirms the importance of this new "subdiscipline." As Wolfe puts it, "Americans are increasingly oblivious to politics, but they are exceptionally sensitive to culture.... Because

they practice politics in cultural terms, Americans cannot be understood with the tool kits developed by political scientists" (qtd. in Grossberg 15).

Grossberg provides a remarkable introduction in which he specifies the relationship between cultural studies and other social sciences, whereupon he sets out his agenda. Theoretically, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* attempts to explain the linkages ("articulation") between rock music and the political strategies of the right. Moreover, he argues that this extremely complex set of relationships helps to reflect (and impact) American postmodernity: "anxiety and desperation (we feel) but do not understand" (1). For these reasons, Grossberg's book serves as one of the most interesting publications of the past year. As an example of cultural studies, it examines an entire region of culture ("rock formation") rather than a single artifact. As political theory, it expands the popular notion of postmodernity from weird architecture, yuppieism, and political correctness to include the reactionary politics of the American "populist" right.

In chapter one, Grossberg outlines his main arguments. Initially, he rejects the conception of culture as either a medium of communication or as pure text whose meaning requires definitive deciphering. Rather, Grossberg relies on Foucault and postmodern theory to propose a cultural studies grounded in the position that texts (the tokens of culture) possess no ultimate authority or sovereignty. To this extent, they feature different meanings and forms at different levels and in different contexts. Moreover, Grossberg distinguishes between the cultural realm and other social spheres, such as politics and economics.

This leads to two recommendations for the field of cultural studies. First, cultural studies must abandon its previous conception of culture as just another medium of communication: this notion presupposes a model in which culture flows freely between free and equal subjects, thereby ignoring the role of power in determining cultural practices. Moreover, cultural studies cannot lose its political grounding by limiting its commentary within the bounds of culture (including the tendency to define everything as culture). Such tendencies in cultural studies have led many to believe that cultural studies is a quest for the hidden "meaning" of something, be it the text itself or the audience's reaction to it.

In other words, Grossberg calls for a cultural studies that reexamines the nature of power and manipulation within culture; this, in turn, demands that cultural studies reaffirm the need to derive from Marxism or some other materialist theory. In so doing, Grossberg hopes to expand the framework of critical theory to account for popular culture and, indeed, to relate cultural practices to political practices. Observe, however, that Grossberg wishes to

avoid simple ideology critique. Instead, he hopes to explain the relationship between cultural practices, ideology, and passion or commitment.

More specifically, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* examines rock music and the manner in which the American right has structured its response to rock. In part I, Grossberg explores what he calls the "articulation of rock" as a form of cultural discourse and how rock music has helped to inform American culture since the 1950s. In part II, Grossberg takes up how the "rock formation" of cultural discourse has become "an apparatus of regulation of space and time in daily life" (67). Finally, Grossberg describes his view of the position of the rock formation within political (material) struggles emerging in the postmodern United States.

In other words, Grossberg examines how a passionate cultural practice of (rebellious) youth culture has evolved to reveal postmodern disillusionment and how, ironically, such disillusionment can serve the political interests of the Right. To this extent, Grossberg wants to investigate why the right (usually through the efforts of the Republican Party) has successfully appropriated popular feelings of commitment and passion even as it persistently suffers electoral defeat. Its political "defeats," however, do not counteract its monopoly of intense feeling and its ability to defang the Left in the cultural realm.

In short, this difficult book brings up a number of very important themes and addresses them in a manner that is neither reductionist nor vague. It successfully comes to terms with postmodernism and cultural studies, and yet it still has time for politics. Although at times the theoretical terminology becomes something of a hindrance (glossary notwithstanding!), other parts of the book could serve as a critical history of rock music.

At the beginning of the book, Grossberg states that "this book is about a population (Americans) which increasingly finds itself caught within the contradictions between its own liberal ideology and its conservative commitments" (p. 13). I would argue that this contradiction, seemingly resolved under the Reagan and Bush regimes, will remain on the academic agenda for some time. American liberalism has persistently laid the foundations for genuine progressive reform, as seen in the traditions of procedural democracy, middle-class reform movements, and mild social activism. The logic of American liberalism, however, has developed such that new social regions (culture, gender equality) have begun important transformations that transcend earlier "intentions." These areas, previously the site of conservative commitments, thereby become the site of conflict. Such conflicts, in turn, help compose social research and social theory.

Endnotes

¹ The phrase "first wave" refers to the reform cycle of middle-class radicalism that swept America, Germany, France, and Britain in the 1890s and more or less persisted until the 1920s. "Second wave" feminism therefore refers to the revival of this critical impulse in the 1960s.

Pedagogy Is Politics: Literary Theory and Critical Teaching
Maria-Regina Kecht (Ed.)
University of Illinois Press, 1992

Reviewed by Anthony Krupp

How are "theory" and social praxis to be thought about together? What is a critic who is discontent with the pedagogical status quo, but unwilling to form allegiance with the humanisms of Bloom, Hirsch or D'Souza, to do? Several of the authors in Maria-Regina Kecht's *Pedagogy Is Politics: Literary Theory and Critical Teaching* express reserved discontent with the claims of some poststructuralist pedagogic alternatives. Poststructuralism is the common object for each of these essays. Some contributors contend that while it bills itself as the most powerful critique of the metaphysics of self-identity, poststructuralism has not yet developed its own lessons into a coherent program. In different ways, the contributors to this volume attempt to chart out the possibilities of a critical poststructuralist pedagogy. While excited by the prospects opened up therein, I'm not sure the general critique is entirely fair to all of those scholars and pedagogues who could be called "poststructuralists." I will return to this point shortly.

After Kecht's excellent introduction, the book's first section entitled "Polemics", is a "taking place" which sets it against another book, Atkins and Johnson (eds), *Writing and Reading Differently*, a supposedly exemplary poststructuralist theorization of pedagogy. While the representation of the Poststructuralist Classroom borders on the phantasmatic at times, one can isolate from it a guiding ethic: one of not prematurely celebrating "difference" in the classroom and thereby missing the social constructedness of the "same." This section, with essays by Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, John Schilb, and Barbara Foley, offers a somewhat infelicitous beginning to the volume, as the thrust of the prose often comes uncomfortably close to a logic of scapegoating. For example, even while the Poststructuralist Classroom is criticized for "provid[ing]