

# ON NANCY FRASER'S *CANNIBAL CAPITALISM* AND THE POSSIBILITY OF A NEW ALLIANCE

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## **ABSTRACT**

The leading theme Fraser develops in her interesting and challenging book is that anti-capitalism, feminism, anti-racism, environmentalism and so forth are imbricated struggles, and that we cannot be anti-capitalist without being at the same time feminist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, environmentalist, and radically democratic; and conversely that we cannot be feminist, environmentalist, anti-racist, and radically democratic without being at the same time anti-capitalist. She therefore envisages the need for an alliance able to see how much the intertwining of different axes of domination, exploitation, and expropriation sustain capitalism. The only way to challenge capitalism (in the wider understanding she proposes) seems to be an alliance which will be able to use capitalism's own contradictions and the crises it inevitably causes (which are not separate crises but different aspects of a single crisis) for its own emancipatory aims. While I do agree with this major point Fraser makes, what I find more problematic, or at least in need of further clarification, is the idea of a single and non fragmented emancipatory counterhegemonic (and socialist) project which would encompass and coordinate the struggles of a multiplicity of social movements, political parties, unions, and so forth. In the paper I will lay out some of my doubts in this regard. The first relates to the way in which we might think of this alliance and its aims. The second concerns the identification of the grounds upon which we think the common struggle should be taken forward. Or, put differently, how we might understand the political struggle Fraser proposes.

## **KEYWORDS**

Capitalism, feminism, subjectivity, embodiment, politics.

Giving a unitary form to many of her previous contributions, Nancy Fraser's *Cannibal Capitalism* makes an important contribution to the ongoing debate. In this interesting and thought-provoking book, Fraser suggests we consider capitalism not only as an "economic system based on private property and market exchange, wage labor and production for profit", but as "a societal order that empowers a profit-driven economy to prey on the extra-economic supports it needs to function: wealth expropriated from nature and subject peoples; multiple forms of care work, chronically undervalued when not wholly disavowed; public

goods and public powers, which capital both requires and tries to curtail; the energy and creativity of working people”<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, on this basis she stresses the urgency of envisioning a new “emancipatory counterhegemonic project” able to encompass and “coordinate the struggles of multiple social movements, political parties, labor unions, and other collective actors”, aimed at putting “the cannibal” at rest forever.<sup>2</sup> In so doing Fraser not only radically challenges the anti-capitalist and socialist tradition, but also calls into question the critical stances and political goals of many social movements and critical traditions, such as feminism, anti-racism, anti-imperialism, environmentalism, and the democratic tradition.

In fact, while she argues that anti-capitalists and socialists should acknowledge how much the intertwining of different axes of domination, exploitation, and expropriation sustain capitalism, and therefore assume some of the awareness produced by those social movements and critical traditions, she also holds that those social movements and critical traditions should in turn acknowledge the necessity of taking an anti-capitalist stance. The possibility of a new alliance between all these subjects, able to use capitalism’s contradictions and crises for its own emancipatory aims, seems to Fraser to be the only possible move in the current conjuncture<sup>3</sup>.

In this paper, after having summarized and briefly commented on Fraser’s proposals for sustaining such an alliance, I will mainly focus on the way she envisages this alliance, and put it into confrontation with my considerations in relation to feminism, which owe much, on the one hand, to the Italian feminist tradition with its long history of criticising the myopias of the socialist traditions from the 1970s onwards; and, on the other, to third wave feminist stances.

Rather than engage in an analysis of its details, I will comment on the book at a general level, mainly focusing on Fraser’s proposal for a single and non fragmented emancipatory counterhegemonic (socialist) project and exploring its aims.

<sup>1</sup> Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal capitalism: How Our System Is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet and What We Can Do about It*, Verso, London – New York, 2022, p. xiv.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. pp. xvi-xvii, where Fraser claims: “Can we envision an emancipatory, counterhegemonic project of eco-societal transformation of sufficient breadth and vision to coordinate the struggles of multiple social movements, political parties, labor unions, and other collective actors—a project aimed at laying the cannibal to rest once and for all? In the current conjuncture, I argue here, nothing short of such a project can avail.”

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. xvii.

## 1. THE NECESSITY OF A NEW ALLIANCE

Over-simplifying a little, we could say that the leading argument Fraser defends in her book is that anti-capitalism, feminism, anti-racism, anti-imperialism, and environmentalism are imbricated struggles, and therefore that, on the one hand, we cannot be anti-capitalist without being at the same time feminist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, environmentalist, and radically democratic, while, on the other hand, we cannot be feminist, environmentalist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and radically democratic without being at the same time anti-capitalist. This of course means not only revising the anti-capitalist and (mainly) socialist tradition, which seems to be the main theme of the book, but also revising and criticising these social movements, at least insofar as they think they can achieve their goals within a capitalist society, or insofar as they consider their struggles as separate and autonomous from each other, or from class struggle and anti-capitalism<sup>4</sup>.

If we consider this as the core of Fraser's proposal, then it is clear that non-liberal feminists should recognise its value. These feminists have in fact often pointed out the importance of the interaction of the axes of domination and of the alliance between multiple critical movements (not only Marxist feminists, but also black and postcolonial feminists, eco-feminists, and so forth).

For instance, the importance of the issue of social reproduction and care work has been at the center of many feminist analyses, at least since the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> From this point of view, it is crucial (as Fraser suggests in the third chapter of the book) to consider capitalism not only as an economic order, but as a social order which is characterized by being a regime both of the economic exploitation of paid workers, and of expropriation of the energies devoted to care and social reproduction, mainly by women.

And this of course is just an example of the more general tenet Fraser defends, namely, that capitalism is held up on "two axes"<sup>6</sup>, exploitation and expropriation, and that expropriation has not only characterized the process of original accumulation, but has been and is still an on-going process, which has taken and

<sup>4</sup> In Chapter 1, Fraser argues for a revised conception of capitalism and anti-capitalism. She makes clear the necessity of understanding capitalist topography and offers the important notion of "boundary struggles". Conversely, toward the end of the chapter, she warns social movements not to engage in the "romanticizing" of some places or practices (nature, periphery, or nurturance) as *per se* sites and practices of resistance to capitalism, or of considering themselves as leading struggles which lie beyond the struggle against capitalism (see pp. 22-26)

<sup>5</sup> Here I refer not only to the recent interest in care, shown for instance in the work of Joan Tronto, Eva Feder Kittay and other care ethicists, or differently in The Care Collective's Care Manifesto, or point to the works of Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Silvia Federici, but could even go so far back as Juliet Mitchell's *Women, the longest revolution*.

<sup>6</sup> See pp. 14-15.

takes different forms in the different phases of capitalism. And, finally, that this process of expropriation has been developed along different axes of discrimination: racial, gender, human/non human, and nature.

Another major point Fraser makes which is also worth considering from a feminist point of view is the following: although it is true that concentrating only on the “ex” of exploitation is not enough to dismantle capitalism, it is also true that capitalism seems able to cannibalise the legitimate emancipatory demands of those who are not only exploited but expropriated; that is to say that it seems able to play off different subjects (populations or groups) against each other, pitting the desires for emancipation of some against those of others, which will in turn remain unseen or unheard. Capitalism moves populations in and out of the realm of workers who are exploited but not expropriated, always leaving someone outside. Using its intrinsic emancipatory force to solve the crisis its own devouring force produces, capitalism seems nevertheless always able to recreate itself at the cost of some groups, subjects, etc. Herein lies its “cannibalism”. This is the reason why single emancipatory struggles, not aware of this wider process, may become myopic, both with reference to their own goals, and with reference to the emancipation of other subjects, or of all the dominated (as for instance happens in liberal feminism).

This is why to Fraser the only way to challenge capitalism seems to be an alliance between subjects or movements that are able to see how much the intertwining of different axes of domination, exploitation and expropriation sustains the system. Such an alliance would at the same time challenge all the existing forms of discrimination. It would be able to use capitalism’s own contradictions and the crises it inevitably causes (which are not separate, but different aspects of a single crisis) for its emancipatory aims, as she argues in the main body of the book, considering for instance feminist, antiracist, and environmentalist struggles<sup>7</sup>.

While this argument, and the reasons Fraser grounds it on, seem deeply convincing at a very general level, on closer inspection some aspects of it seem to be problematic or at least in need of clarification. As I said above, in this article I will concentrate mainly on the suggestion of unifying all these instances into a single and non fragmented emancipatory counterhegemonic socialist project, which seems to be at the core of Fraser’s proposal, and I will consider the feasibility of such an alliance, its aims, and the political grounds upon which it would operate.

<sup>7</sup> See p. 78 where Fraser claims: “This is a tall order, to be sure. But what brings it within the realm of the possible is a ‘happy coincidence’: all roads lead to one idea—namely, capitalism.”

## 2. A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

Although Fraser's project is appealing, and its elaboration very sophisticated, making clear that she is aware of potential criticisms, various problems can still be identified in relation to the idea of a single unified emancipatory project that would encompass and aim to eliminate all forms of discrimination, subjugation, exploitation, and expropriation.

In very general terms, from a feminist standpoint, or at least from that which I most closely adhere to, the universalistic nature of her project could be called into question. In fact, one of the most important results feminism has achieved through its evolution is its calling into question of the possibility of making universal claims or predications on the subject, or of defining political categories once and for all, even its own<sup>8</sup>. This feminist standpoint invites us to consider the risk of deeply hidden biases and partiality in these kinds of predication. We should remember, for instance, that the very notion of emancipation, which frequently recurs in the book, and fixes the nature of the proposed project, has been challenged a number of times in feminist history, as it could imply that it is necessary to reach a given and defined form of life rather than proposing the freedom to invent it anew.

Although Fraser is more than aware of such problems, some doubts and considerations may be still put forward, as in the end she seems to take a very specific position regarding the shape of such an alliance and the aims it should pursue. I will firstly outline the kind of considerations that could be put forward, and then go into some of them in more detail in the following pages.

Firstly, a question could be posed in relation to the way we think of this alliance and its aims. We might ask whether this alliance has to be thought of as partial and temporary, or structural and final. A second doubt could be raised in relation to the identification of the grounds upon which we think the common struggle should be taken forward. Fraser indicates the necessity of moving both on economic and institutional grounds, but I will question whether there are not in fact also other grounds worth considering. We might ask whether it is only the boundary between the economic and the political that should be considered, or whether it is also important to consider the role of cultural or symbolic struggles. Thirdly, we might question the outcome: the new social (socialist) order she

<sup>8</sup> See for instance: S. Harding, "The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory", in *Signs*, 11, 4, 1986, pp. 645-664; A. Rich, *Notes towards a Politics of Location*, in Ead. *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, Norton & Co. New York-London, 1988, pp. 210-213, and T. de Lauretis, "Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness", in *Feminist Studies* 16, 1, 1990, pp.115-150.

envisages in the last chapter. In the following pages I will more deeply explore the first two points and hint at the final one.

### 3. WHAT KIND OF ALLIANCE?

Concerning the first question related to the nature and aims of the alliance Fraser is envisaging, we may ask whether this alliance has to be considered as structural or temporary. That is to say, we may wonder whether there is a complete overlap between all the positions of the allied subjects, or just an intersection leading to temporary and partial alliances, but not to a completely unified struggle. Considering the aims of the project, this might lead us to ask whether, when aiming for the end of capitalism, even when reconsidered in light of Fraser's enlarged understanding of capitalism, this alliance would also succeed in bringing to an end patriarchy, heterosexism, racism, the consumption of nature, etc., or if these axes of discrimination and sites of crises could also somehow remain active within a non-capitalist society such as the one Fraser is envisaging. While it is clear that capitalism makes use of patriarchy, heterosexism, racism and so forth, and all activists should be aware of that, it is possible to query whether their origin lies in capitalism, and to pose the old question as to whether or not a non-capitalist socialist society, even in the way Fraser thinks of it, would have no place for sexism, gender or race based discriminations or would have a different relationship to nature and non-human life. In other words, we might ask whether all these different aims can be completely unified. Finally, we might also ask whether it is important to consider the possibility of internal conflict in this alliance.

I will now analyse these points, focusing on the relationship between feminist and anti-capitalist stances. While, on the one hand, feminists may hold that any anti-capitalist project should acknowledge the problem of the expropriation of care, and conversely it is important for them to understand how the feminist struggle partially overlaps with the anti-capitalist struggle, there is still room to question whether an anti-capitalist struggle would solve all of the problems women have as a result of male domination.

Fraser makes a very important point when she makes clear that women who try to free themselves, for instance from the burden of care, cannot be blind to the fact that in a capitalist society this demand will necessarily only be met in a limited way, moving the burden to other subjects or populations (people of colour, non western people, poorer people). However, we might still ask whether Fraser's proposed alliance would be able to solve all the problems women have as a result of male domination (or also black and brown people have as a result of racism and so forth). For instance, it is of course true that rethinking the boundary or

connection between production and social reproduction is a major issue for feminist politics, yet the kinds of issues feminism poses go far beyond that.

Leaving social reproduction aside, reproduction itself, that is, control over bodily reproduction, is also at the centre of specific feminist demands. Differences between male and female bodies, and all the kinds of conflicts these differences could bring about (not only concerning the control of reproduction, giving birth, abortion and so forth, but also in the expression of pleasure and sexuality and in freedom from male violence) could still hold in a socialist society such as that Fraser envisages. We could ask, then, whether all these different kinds of conflicts would be addressed by the proposed overall alliance and solved in the resulting socialist social order or whether, on the contrary, these conflicts would still exist in the new society. If the latter, then we must also ask whether a feminist struggle would be needed that is not limited to emancipating women from the burden of care, or from their exploitation and expropriation, but would propose, for instance, the redefinition and value of care, of embodiment, of female pleasure and sexuality. In other words, we might question whether guaranteeing women the same access to decision-making and democratic participation and a fair allocation of the surplus<sup>9</sup> is sufficient, as Fraser seems to claim, to address all these issues. And, of course, the same kinds of questions may be articulated in relation to compulsory heterosexuality, or the conflict or alliance between humans and the non human, and so forth.

Thus we might wonder, as I've said above, whether the result of the emancipatory counterhegemonic project Fraser is envisaging would be the end of capitalism together with the end of patriarchy, heterosexism, racism, etc., or whether these axes of discrimination, while intertwined with the anti-capitalist struggle, would still hold during and after the fight against capitalism, although maybe in different forms.

I posed the question as to whether we should think of the proposed alliance as structural or temporary, as a complete overlapping of struggles or as a fertile intersection between some but not all the issues posed by these different social movements. In light of this doubt, to claim that anti-capitalism "gives the direction and critical force"<sup>10</sup> to all the other struggles, seems to me a rather bold statement.

The same train of thought can explain the final issue I mentioned above, concerning the possibility of internal conflicts between the allied subjects. When looking at these social movements in all their complexity, it is possible to imagine conflicts in their relative aims, for instance that between the LGBTQ+ movement and part of the feminist movement concerning the acknowledgment of trans-

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 153-154.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 112.

women as women. And again we might ask whether the alliance Fraser is envisaging would be able to address or harmonize these conflicts, or whether she thinks that the anti-capitalist/socialist stance would be able to give them some order, maybe recognising that some demands are more important than others, or even considering some not to be valid at all?

On this subject, third wave feminism teaches us that within these alliances, or even in order to render them possible, it is worth considering that many of the allied subjects will simultaneously play the double role of oppressed and oppressor: they will be fragmented within. Thus not only capitalism but also the allied subjects themselves will be in need of criticism and transformation, a point which does not seem to interest Fraser. This brings us again to the problem of how we should think the subject and the notion of emancipation I mentioned earlier.

#### 4. WHAT KIND OF POLITICS?

To conclude this article, I will turn to another major point Fraser is making in her book, namely that of redefining the spheres or grounds upon which this enlarged anti-capitalist, but also feminist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, environmentalist and radically democratic struggle should be taken forward.

As she says:

If socialism aims to remedy all capitalism's wrongs, it faces a very big job. It must invent a new societal order that overcomes not "only" class domination but also asymmetries of gender and sex, racial/ethnic/imperial oppression, and political domination across the board. Likewise, it must deinstitutionalize multiple crisis tendencies: not "just" economic and financial but also ecological, social-reproductive, and political. Finally, a socialism for the twenty-first century must vastly enlarge the purview of democracy—and not "just" by democratizing decision making within a predefined "political" zone. More fundamentally, it must democratize the very definition and demarcation, the very frames, that constitute "the political".<sup>11</sup>

One of the main issues of her book is thus to tie together the economic aspects and the non-economic aspects of the capitalist social order (and its contradictions and crises) and to make them the object of a renewed political struggle, in which the boundaries of the "political" also need to be redefined.

While this seems to me to be one of Fraser's most important points, there is still room to question the extent of the redefinition of politics and of the "political" that she is proposing.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

The core of the reinvention of politics suggested in the book seems to point mainly in the direction of bringing the economic and the institutional dimensions closer together, meaning that traditional socialist demands (such as the transformation of economic structures, the ownership of the means of production, and the division of profits), should also be accompanied by some radically democratic demands, such as when she argues that it is necessary to challenge our present political institutions and to reinvent the democratic space. So one might suppose that the struggles she envisages are to be thought of in the form of public demands and struggles, mediated by parties, unions, social movements, and the like, in order to obtain changes in political institutions and economic structures.

While of course this is a key point of her analysis we could ask if this redefinition of the political ground is completely satisfying, or whether it is possible to consider the role, or even the necessity, of another political ground, namely that which we call "cultural" or "symbolic".

As far as I'm concerned, this can be considered a major absence in Fraser's analyses, with reference for instance to feminist analyses concerning the political. In fact there is quite a distance between Fraser's position and what can be defined as "cultural feminism" (although I don't like this definition, as it is too internal to the US debate). Fraser seems to be ambivalent on the role of the cultural or symbolic dimension. While at the beginning of the book, she seems to be sufficiently suspicious that "activists and scholars have become sophisticated practitioners of discourse analysis while remaining utterly innocent of the traditions of *Kapitalkritik*",<sup>12</sup> she of course does not ignore, and, on the contrary, also mentions the role of processes of stigmatization, of the imaginary dimension, and so forth.

To conclude this article, I would like to emphasise the role of this latter dimension, and question Fraser's position, as I don't think that this cultural or symbolic dimension can be reduced to the other two dimensions she focuses on (economy and participative institutions). For while it is certainly linked and intertwined with them, my feminist standpoint convinces me that it should be considered on its own merit.

On several occasions in the book Fraser mentions the role of processes of stigmatization, the role of the imaginary, and the different grammars of domination capitalism makes use of, even pointing to the importance of the "metapolitical process" of "redrawing the boundaries that demarcate societal arenas and deciding what to include within them"<sup>13</sup>. However, she doesn't seem

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

to consider that working on a symbolic, cultural, discursive dimension is an important part of the political effort she envisages. I, on the other hand, hold that working on this dimension is crucial not only in order to make the alliance possible, but also to create the foundations for a fully functioning participatory democracy.

I will give a couple of examples. In analysing the persistence of patterns of expropriation in the different phases of capitalism and their hidden functioning, Fraser invokes stigmatization, for instance concerning racism in financialized capitalism<sup>14</sup>. Here Fraser seems to claim that racism (which she says is “hardwired” in capitalism in its different phases) easily goes unquestioned, because it is efficaciously hidden by processes of stigmatization, that is to say by forms of the naturalization of categorizations that usually exceed our critical capacities, even when we are critical of capitalism. This is because these categorizations, which, to use Pierre Bourdieu’s terminology, “inhabit us”, remain unquestioned if we look only at the surface of economic dynamics, as they form the “non economic” precondition of capitalism as a socio-economical order<sup>15</sup>.

Yet to dismantle this domination we can work, as many feminists (and Bourdieu himself) would suggest, also on a cultural and symbolic level, denouncing the artificial nature of stigmatizing processes, denouncing processes of de-historicization and the naturalization of racist/sexist ascriptions and the powerful mechanism of the embodiment of habitus<sup>16</sup>. Therefore in order to criticize capitalism, and racism and sexism, or to rethink the relations between humans and the non-human, we should also engage ourselves on this ground (and only this work will, in my view, permit alliances and full democratic participation).

At a different level, let’s consider the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic Fraser refers to at the end of the book. I hold that this experience has shown us not only the general crisis of capitalism which Fraser denounces, but, at least in my analysis, has indicated to us the impossibility of continuing to think of human coexistence and society on the basis of the abstract self-sufficient individual of liberal modernity, calling instead for the necessity of reconsidering the human condition as fragile, vulnerable, and interconnected<sup>17</sup>. Therefore it has made it both necessary and possible to rethink humans and their relation to others and the planet, to rethink politics and to develop a different understanding of society.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., chap. 2, p. 48 onward.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> See for instance P. Bourdieu, *Male domination*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> C. Botti, *Vulnerabili. Cura e convivenza dopo la pandemia*, Castelvecchi, Roma, 2022; C. Botti, *Pandemic, Vulnerability and Care: A Care Approach to Global Risks*, Iride, 2023, forthcoming.

This is a cultural but also political struggle I deem crucial. However Fraser's book does not seem to acknowledge this important political engagement.

In answer to the question Fraser poses at the beginning of the book - "Should we think of it [capitalism] as an economic system, a form of ethical life, or an institutionalized societal order?"<sup>18</sup> - I think there is room to consider all of these levels and to understand the ethical and political engagement that criticising the prevailing symbolic order entails as part of the effort to dismantle capitalism along with sexism, racism and so forth. To conclude, while Fraser's proposal is challenging and urgent, it has some aspects that are problematic or in need of further clarification.

<sup>18</sup> See N. Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*, cit. p. 3.