

# NEO-LIBERAL CAPITALISM AND THE POLITICAL ROLE OF BODIES

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## **ABSTRACT**

Taking into account Fraser's analysis, the focus of the author is on the relationship between production and reproduction, paying particular attention to neo-liberal capitalism as a social order and the feminist view of bodies as political means. The author wonders if her analysis is not overly focused on the so-called "Global North". Doesn't this internal critique of feminism risk neutralizing the wide range of political issues elaborated by many different feminist movements across the world?

## **KEYWORDS**

Neoliberalism, Reproduction, Body, Debt, Feminization of Labour, Feminism

The critical definition of capitalism proposed by Nancy Fraser in her recent book *Cannibal Capitalism*<sup>1</sup> uses a Marxist perspective to move beyond the boundaries of traditional orthodox Marxism. She argues that capitalism is not a purely economic system in classical Marxist terms. According to Fraser, the economic foreground features of capitalism depend in fact on "non-economic background conditions"<sup>2</sup>. Although "defined by private property, the accumulation of 'self-expanding value, the market allocation of social surplus and of major inputs to commodity production, including (doubly) free labor", for Fraser, capitalism "is rendered possible by four crucial background conditions, concerned, respectively, with social reproduction, the earth's ecology, political power, and ongoing infusions of wealth expropriated from racialized peoples"<sup>3</sup>. To understand capitalism, therefore, Fraser suggests we "resituate Marx's front story in relation to these four backstories"<sup>4</sup>. In

<sup>1</sup> N. Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism. How Our System Is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet—and What We Can Do about it*, Verso Books, London-New York 2022.

<sup>2</sup> *Ivi*, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

others words, “we must connect the Marxian perspective to other emancipatory currents of critical theorizing: feminist, ecological, political, anti-imperialist, and anti-racist”<sup>5</sup>.

Taking into account Fraser’s analysis, the focus of this text is on the relationship between production and reproduction, paying particular attention to neo-liberal capitalism as a social order and the feminist view of bodies as political means.

## 1. CAPITALISM AS TYPE OF SOCIETY

According to Fraser, capitalism is not only an economic system, it is a type of society in which economic activities and relations are separate from other non-economic dimensions, on which, however, the economized activities depend. Fraser writes in *Cannibal capitalism*:

Part and parcel of the capitalist order, none of the ‘non-economic’ realms affords a wholly external standpoint that could underwrite an absolutely pure and fully radical form of critique. On the contrary, political projects that appeal to what they imagine to be capitalism’s ‘outside’ usually end up recycling capitalist stereotypes, as they counterpose female nurturance to male aggression, spontaneous cooperation to economic calculation, nature’s holistic organicism to anthropocentric speciesism, subsistence communalism to occidental individualism. To premise one’s struggles on these oppositions is not to challenge but unwittingly to reflect the institutionalized societal order of capitalist society<sup>6</sup>.

As Fraser suggests in the book, when accounting for the relations between the “foreground” and the “background” conditions of capitalism we must hold together three distinct ideas.

First, capitalism’s ‘non-economic’ realms serve as enabling background conditions for its economy; the latter depends for its very existence on values and inputs from the former. Second, however, capitalism’s ‘non-economic’ realms have a weight and character of their own, which can under certain circumstances provide resources for anti-capitalist struggle. Nevertheless—and this is the third point—these realms are part and parcel of capitalist society, historically co-constituted in tandem with its economy, and marked by their symbiosis with it<sup>7</sup>.

In this sense, it can be said that capitalist society is an economy that is distinct from (but, at the same time, dependent on) “politics” or political order; it’s an economic system of production, that is distinct from (but, at the same time, dependent on) “social reproduction”; it’s a domain of exploitative relations, that is distinct from (but, at the same time, dependent on) others forms of expropriation; and it’s a socio-historical process that is distinct from (but, at the same time,

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ivi, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

dependent on) a material substratum of nonhuman nature. In short, Fraser understands four types of separation as presuppositions of capitalism:

1. the separation between economics and politics;
2. the separation between economic production and social reproduction;
3. the separation between exploitation and expropriation;
4. the separation between natural and human.

These forms of separation have already been recognized in the past, but only from the point of view of the superstructure. That is, as superstructural fields that justify or make possible the economic structure. However, for Fraser, these divisions are not only the necessary and primitive condition of the productive structure, but also the very terrain upon which capitalism develops in order to evolve over time and move on to its next form. In this sense, Fraser's perspective allows us to overcome a purely economic view of capitalism and to focus on new anti-capitalist struggles.

## 2. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION

I am particularly interested in the relationship between production and reproduction, which is an issue that Fraser had already discussed in other works<sup>8</sup>. In *Cannibal Capitalism* she explores the connection between these two realms in the light of the economic crisis and the environmental crisis.

I hold that the relationship between production and reproduction is especially important today as a way of detecting key changes at the level of capitalist modes of production in a post-Fordist system and of re-defining the role of capitalism as an institutionalized social order. The neoliberal idea of the family institution is particularly interesting in this regard.

Fraser focuses on the intensification of the classic contradictions intrinsic to capitalism: that is, the separation of social reproduction from the economic sphere as a constitutive characteristic of capitalism, which, because production depends on reproduction, causes capitalism to fall into a contradiction. When it intensifies economic growth, disregarding social reproduction, the economy is thrown into crisis, damaging the whole system and making the contradiction manifest.

There is no doubt that global, financial, neo-liberal capitalism has changed the boundaries between production and reproduction and was intent on pursuing a “conservative revolution”. According to Fraser, central to this phenomenon is the

<sup>8</sup> See Id., *Fortunes of feminism. From state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis*, Verso Books, Brooklyn, New York (2013); C. Arruzza, T. Bhattacharya and N. Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*, Verso Books, Brooklyn, New York 2019.

increasingly important role that women, as a paid labor force, have come to play in the disintegration of the classical family model, which was functional to Fordist industrial capitalism.

Among the most important social effects of this process, Fraser points to the enormous cuts in the welfare system on which the mid-20th century capitalist system was based.

What she calls the “care gap” has been filled by migrant workers from poorer countries, while wages have fallen, and low-paid jobs and the spread of the so-called gig economy or economy of the precariat has increased.

Fraser criticizes second wave feminism, because although it emancipates women it “joins with marketisation to undermine social protection”<sup>9</sup>.

On this point, I wonder if her analysis is not overly focused on the so-called “Global North”. Doesn't this internal critique of feminism risk neutralizing the wide range of political issues elaborated by many different feminist movements across the world?

### 3. BODIES AND NEW FORMS OF VALUE

One of the most significant problems of the second half of the twentieth century was that states were unable to prevent post-industrial strategies from exploiting areas typically considered to be non-economic. It is no surprise, for example, that among the leading theorists of neo-liberalism are those such as Gary Becker, who have developed the concept of a “new domestic economy”<sup>10</sup>. This “new domestic economy” transcends the boundaries between production and social reproduction, between production and consumption, and between production and circulation, in order to transform even the most intimate bodily functions devoted to care into commercial goods and services<sup>11</sup>.

The fundamentally conservative aspect of these neoliberal politics is what Melinda Cooper calls the “strategic reinvention” of a family tradition that is much older than the classic Fordist family, and which is now functional to authoritarian governments<sup>12</sup>.

This is the re-proposition of a model of rights centered around the family and thus around private responsibility. Welfare is thus transformed from a redistributive program into an immense apparatus of control which reinforces private family

<sup>9</sup> N. Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*, cit., p. 69.

<sup>10</sup> See G. Becker, *A Treatise on the Family*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge CA 1981.

<sup>11</sup> See for example M. Cooper and C. Waldby, *Clinical Labor. Tissue and Research Subjects in the Global Bioeconomy*, Duke University Press, Durham (USA) 2014; and E. Illouz and D. Kaplan, *What is Sexual Capital?*, Polity Press, Cambridge (UK) 2022.

<sup>12</sup> See M. Cooper, *Family Values. Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*, Zone Books, New York NY 2017, p. 21.

responsibilities, while deficit spending is transferred from the state to households through an entirely unprecedented debt mechanism<sup>13</sup>.

For a long time, new forms of debt have far too easily been granted to deprived families, particularly women, in different ways and in many parts of the world. In these cases debt is not only an economic issue, but becomes a “living condition”<sup>14</sup>. In this process, care and social reproduction are not only the preconditions of production but become new forms of value on the market. What is at stake here is not only shadow labor, but a labor of shadows, as people seem to be reduced to shadows.

The “feminization of labor” is a definition that I find particularly useful, and has been proposed in various current analyses such as that by Angela McRobbie in the UK<sup>15</sup> and Cristina Morini in Italy<sup>16</sup>. The argument is that today labor is similar to the care work that was traditionally associated with the female condition, and so has become increasingly irregular, more badly paid, given less recognition, associated with lower social rights and status and considered to be less crucial for the construction of individual lives; but it is also more relational and affective, as well as often requiring the worker to be flexible and available at all times, meaning they must always be willing to change the work they do and where they do it.

There is no doubt that the current and radical transformation of the processes of valorization is no longer connected to the economic domain alone, but is at the origin of a development that affects all spheres of life. The political implications of this phenomenon are enormous.

Can we continue to talk about labor? How can we give political force to care and reproduction as an autonomous and specific field, not immediately involved in labor activities? And, last but not least, is it possible to identify a new connection between democracy and socialism, as Fraser tries to argue?

According to Fraser, a socialism for the twenty-first century would have to vastly enlarge the purview of democracy. But many questions remain: What does this mean in relation to the transformation of the relationships between production and reproduction? Is socialism a form of the democratization of democracy? If, as Fraser says, socialism should not be “just” a democratization of decision-making within a predefined “political” sphere, what kind of practices and conflicts can we imagine that would be able to democratically valorize a new role for “the political”? And what examples are there of proposals for this?

<sup>13</sup> See L. Cavallero and V. Gago, *A Feminist Reading of Debt*, Pluto Press, London 2021.

<sup>14</sup> I would like to refer to my book: E. Stimilli, *The Debt of the Living. Asceticism and Capitalism*, Suny Press, New York 2016.

<sup>15</sup> See A. McRobbie, *Reflections on Feminism, Immaterial Labour and the Post-Fordist regime*, in “New Formations (70)2010, pp. 60-76.

<sup>16</sup> See C. Morini, *Per amore o per forza. Femminilizzazione del lavoro e biopolitiche del corpo*, Ombre corte, Verona 2010.

Fraser rightly mentions the universal basic income. Perhaps the type of feminist strike that is proposed by the Argentinian feminist movement can offer another example. There the vulnerability intrinsic in the violence against women has been transformed into a political issue, from a passive dimension into an agency that cannot exist without the body. “The strike, as an undulating, long-winded process, draws a map of conflicts that dilute the rigid borders between life and work, body and territory, law and violence. The strike becomes a practical tool of political investigation and a process capable of constructing transversality between radically different bodies, conflicts, and territories”<sup>17</sup>. This proposes a crucial task for our times: developing a new relationship between bodies and politics able to democratically valorize the new sense of the political, in its intersectional role in relation to race, class and gender.

<sup>17</sup> V. Gago, *Feminist International. How to change everything*, Verso, London 2020, p. 6.