

SOCIAL THEORY, NORMATIVE CRITERIA, POLITICAL DIAGNOSIS QUESTIONING THREE LEVELS OF NANCY FRASER'S CRITICAL THEORY OF CAPITALISM

GIORGIO FAZIO

Dipartimento di Filosofia

Sapienza Università di Roma

giorgio.fazio@uniroma1.it

ABSTRACT

In the paper the author examines in depth three levels of Nancy Fraser's Critical Theory of Capitalism. The first order of issues concerns Fraser's social theory, the clarification of the emancipatory potential of modern societal differentiation. The second order of issues concerns the normative level of Fraser's critical theory. The point the author wants to ask is whether in Fraser's new conception of capitalism as the structural root of all forms of oppression, she tends to abandon her earlier intuitions, which led to differentiate clearly between forms of oppression based on status differences and forms of oppression based on class. The third concerns the political diagnosis of the time connected with Fraser's theoretical elaboration. Fraser elaborates a very complex and suggestive account of the populist moment. Is this account not in danger of overemphasizing the existence of a clear anti-neoliberal tendency, in all populist movements, and of neglecting instead the often detectable symbiosis between regressive and authoritarian drives, on the one hand, and a model of possessive individualism pushed to the extreme, on the other?

KEYWORDS

Critique, Capitalism, Emancipation, Societal Differentiation, normative Criteria, Populism, Neoliberalism

Cannibal Capitalism by Nancy Fraser is an extremely rich book, full of very inspiring analyses, suggestions and food for thought. It constitutes a sort of systematic point of convergence for the different research paths that Fraser has been pursuing over recent years through an enormous quantity of articles, presentations, interviews. In this paper I would now like to examine in depth three orders of issues. The first order of issues concerns Fraser's social theory. The second one the normative level of Fraser's critical theory. The third concerns the political diagnosis of the time connected with Fraser's theoretical elaboration.

1. SOCIAL THEORY AND SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION

I would like to ask Fraser for further clarification regarding the role she assigns to the concept of modern functional differentiation. It seems to me that there is a sort of tension within Fraser's social theory.

On the one hand Fraser traces the modern process of functional differentiation back to capitalism, making it structurally related and dependent on capitalism itself. On the other hand, however, she seems not to consider the modern process of functional differentiation – the differentiation between economy and politics, economy and social reproduction, economy and nature – as something that can be simply overcome, in the same way as – for her – capitalism can and should be overcome. According to this second line of argumentation, Fraser seems to distinguish more clearly between capitalism – which we must criticize in her view – and the modern process of social differentiation – which we cannot simply liquidate.

It remains however unclear – for me – what might be for her the normative status of the process of societal differentiation *per se*.

Fraser starts in her analysis by characterizing social reproduction, ecology, political power, and expropriation as necessary background conditions for capitalism's economic front story, stressing their functionality for commodity production, labor exploitation, and capital accumulation.

From this perspective the different social spheres in question must be viewed as “artefacts of capitalism” (68). A systemic-structural explanation can show how “each of them gets its distinctive quality (its normativity, its social ontology) from the position it occupies in the larger institutional structure – from the way it is set apart from, and made to contrast with, the other constitutive elements of that structure, including the capitalist economy” (*ibid.*, 68).

On the other hand, Fraser admits that this first level of analysis does not capture the full story of capitalism's foreground/background relations. She stresses also that capitalist society encompasses a plurality of “value spheres”, each of which has its own inner logic of development, which must not be denied by a functionalist account reading each social sphere as a mere function of capitalist economy (68). A social-level explanation can show how each of the different modern social realms is based on different normativities and ontologies, on “sedimented patterns of action and interpretation, which are themselves subject to contestation, disruption, and transformation” (*ibid.*, 52).

Even as these “non-economic” orders make commodity production possible, they are not reducible to that enabling function. Far from being wholly exhausted by the dynamics of accumulation, each of these hidden abodes harbors distinctive ontologies of social practice and normative ideals.

As Fraser writes in *Cannibal Capitalism*:

Moreover, these “non-economic” ideals are bearers of critical-political possibility. Especially in times of crisis, they can be turned against core economic practices associated with capital accumulation. In such times, the structural divisions that normally serve to segregate the various normativities within their own institutional spheres tend to weaken. When the separations fail to hold, capitalism’s subjects – who live, after all, in more than one sphere – experience normative conflict. Far from bringing in ideas from the “outside”, they draw on capitalism’s own complex normativity to criticize it, mobilizing against the grain the multiplicity of ideals that coexist, at times uneasily, in an institutionalized societal order premised on foreground/background divisions. Thus, the view of capitalism as an institutionalized societal order helps us understand how a critique of capitalism is possible from within it”.

In any case, for Fraser, it would be wrong to construe society, polity, nature, and periphery romantically, as “outside” capitalism and as inherently opposed to it. 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 spontaneous cooperation to economic calculation, nature’s holistic organicism to anthropocentric speciesism, communalism to occidental individualism.

To summarize what has been said so far, we could say that what is problematic, for Fraser, is not the institutional differentiation per se but the perverse, destructive form it assumes in capitalist societies. The difficulty is not, in other words, that these societies separate social reproduction from economic production, society from nature, economy from polity, but rather that they do so in a self-contradictory way. Fraser does not claim that modern societal differentiations are inherently oppressive and not worth preserving. But she says that if we decide to keep them, we must institutionalize them in a different way. Only by breaking the capitalist tendency to turn those divisions into means of dysfunction and domination we can realize their emancipatory potential.

It is *first of all* a matter of making the different social spheres communicable, compatible, not antithetical and antagonistic. *Secondly*, it is a matter of reversing the priority between production and social reproduction, between production and nature, between production and politics. Economic production must be oriented by the demands of social reproduction, the political ecology, the demands of democracy. *Thirdly*, it is a question of democratizing the process of institutional design, making the content and scope of different social spheres a political issue.

This means, for example, conceiving new institutional designs that reconcile work-life balance, that convert production in ecological terms, that subject the economy to democratic rules.

Having said this, however, I have the impression that Fraser never clarifies on a theoretical level what the emancipatory potential of modern societal differentiation is or could finally be.

I guess that for Fraser this emancipatory potential is linked to the fact that the very process of social differentiation allows for a greater articulation and expression

of the pluralism of the spheres of human life and a greater ability to organize these differentiated spheres in the light of their different functions, for example socialization, material reproduction, political democracy. However, it remains unclear in my opinion first of all whether for Fraser this process, which is open and always politically contestable, is universalistic in nature or only concerns Western societies.

It also remains not entirely clear to me in what sense, for Fraser, a relatively autonomous economic sphere – even though it is permeable to the demands and questions of the other social realms and is reincorporated into them – is desirable from a functional point of view and from a normative point of view.

Further questions also arise with regard to this point.

The advocates of the capitalist system claim that it is precisely the functional specialization of an autonomous sphere of the economic market that has made it possible to gain advantages in terms of innovation and efficiency in production and distribution, as well as in terms of the promotion of values like negative liberty, autonomy, creativity. With what arguments then could one defend the thesis that a radically democratic organization of the economy, freed from competition and from anonymous forms of market regulation based on price dynamics, could achieve the same advantages in terms of innovation and efficiency in the production of goods and the satisfaction of needs?

Furthermore, why exclude the possibility that the economic crises might be overcome in the future by a new democratic regulation and limitation of capitalist processes of accumulation – by a reincorporation of economy in 'society' and in 'ecology', which will not deprive society of the advantages that market economy can offer in terms of innovation and efficiency in production and distribution, as well as in terms of the promotion of values like negative liberty, autonomy, and efficiency?

Also with regard to this point, I would like to ask a final question.

One sometimes gets the impression that in Fraser's scheme, while the different normative ontologies of non-economic spheres are taken seriously, a too narrow and limited version of the economic sphere of the capitalist market as such is given.

It seems at times that in Fraser's social theory, the economy as such can only be challenged and criticized by drawing on the normative resources of other social spheres.

Fraser describes the capitalist market economic sphere primarily in Marxian terms, i.e. as a sphere characterized by four basic features:

(1) The private ownership of the means of production and class division between owners and producers; (2) The institutionalized marketization and commodification of wage labor and the related tendency to exploit the labor force; (3) The dynamic of capital accumulation, premised on an orientation toward the expansion of capital as opposed to consumption; (4) A peculiar centrality of markets, used not only for distribution of goods for personal consumption, but also

for allocating productive inputs and general societal resources that are intrinsically trans-individual or collective.

In connection with these four characteristics, Fraser points out that the capitalist economy has its own normativity: it is legitimized to the social actor's eyes in regard to ethical values like autonomy, negative freedom, meritocracy, formal equality. However, having said that, I believe it is possible to stress that there are also other normative instances, in the economic sphere, that cannot be entirely reduced to the idea of the market as a strategic sphere in which everyone follows their own interests.

I refer here to the same remarks that Nancy Fraser developed in her famous essay *What is critical about critical theory?*¹, when she criticized Habermas' conception of the capitalist market as a norm-free system. As Fraser herself argued in this text against Habermas also in the capitalist market strategic exchanges between social actors oriented by interest maximization always take place within a horizon of intersubjectively shared meanings and norms. Usually actors subscribe, at least tacitly, to some common notions of reciprocity and some shared conceptions about the social meanings of objects, including things that can be exchanged. Similarly, in the workplaces of capitalism, managers, employees and collaborators normally coordinate their actions to some extent consensually and with some explicit or implicit reference to normative assumptions, even if the consensus is reached incorrectly and the norms fail to pass critical scrutiny. But once it is admitted that even the capitalist economic system has a moral-cultural dimension, when describing the capitalist market in Marxian terms or as a sphere based only on values such as efficiency, negative freedom, competition and meritocracy, does one not run the risk of assuming the same ideological view of the market that is held by the advocates of capitalism and neo-liberalism?

After all, within the economic sphere there are not only class struggles for redistribution, but also struggles for recognition, which emanate from injuries related to normative expectations that arise within the capitalist market itself and within the world of labor. Why then should the values of solidarity, of cooperation, of respect for the environment, only be learned by social actors in social spheres outside the economy proper, and not also, for example, in the ambivalent experiences, including but not limited to injustice, that take place in the domain of work in the capitalist market?

¹ N. Fraser, *What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender*, "New German Critique", n. 35, 1985, pp. 97-131.

2. NORMATIVE CRITERIA

I now turn to the second order of problems, related to normative issues. I would like to start from a general consideration.

On the one hand, Fraser's aim has been in general to contribute to the critical reconstruction of Marxism, overcoming the reductionist, economic and teleological versions of orthodox Marxism. Fraser wanted to put the analysis of the forms of domination and social suffering, which orthodox Marxism occluded, back at the center of the Marxist critique of capitalist societies: issues such as gender and sexuality, colonialism and post-colonialism, ecology and political exclusion.

On the other hand, however, Fraser's work has been equally animated by the intent to formulate an innovative theory of justice, capable of entering into dialogue with many other strands of the contemporary philosophical-political debate. This second side of this theoretical commitment has prompted her to elaborate a way of theorizing that has become detached from Marxism.

It is significant in this sense that Fraser has defined her social theory as neo-Weberian. By embracing the theory of social differentiation and the irreducible difference between class and status, Fraser wanted to make a radical break with «any totalizing Marxist view of capitalism as a monolithic system of interconnected structures of oppression, seamlessly reinforcing one another».

In light of this tension Fraser's goal has been to develop a broad conception of justice, i.e. one capable of accommodating at least two types of issues.

On the one hand, a conception of justice capable of thematizing the traditional problems of distributive justice, in particular poverty, exploitation, inequality and class differences. At the same time, a conception of justice capable of thematizing problems of recognition, in particular disrespect, cultural imperialism and status hierarchy. Fraser attempts to theorize misdistribution and non-recognition together, without reducing either to the other. Fraser has spoken in this regard of a two-dimensional conception of justice. The common normative principle of the two dimensions of justice – those relating to recognition and those relating to distribution – is that of equal participation. For participatory equality to be possible, at least two conditions must be met: first, the distribution of material resources must ensure the participants' independence and voice; the second condition for participatory equality is intersubjective.

On the one hand, therefore, Fraser has emphasized that the claims of redistribution and recognition are completely intertwined. They cannot be separated from each other. On the other hand, Fraser also has emphasized that each of these issues has a relative independence. Neither can be entirely achieved indirectly, through reforms directed exclusively at the other. In this sense, gender, race, but also class are two-dimensional categories, composed of status and class.

I would now like to ask Fraser whether there has been any change in this question in her latest reflections.

Fraser now insists that the structural roots of non-economic forms of domination and oppression – such as sexism, racism, cultural imperialism – are to be found in the organization of capitalist society.

The point I wanted to ask is whether in Fraser's new conception of capitalism as the structural root of all forms of oppression, she tends to abandon the earlier intuitions, which led to differentiate clearly between forms of oppression based on status differences and forms of oppression based on class. Doesn't Fraser's expanded view of capitalism risk once again offering the vision of a system of interconnected structures of oppression, seamlessly reinforcing one another, that she wanted to abandon? A central thesis to Fraser's whole work has been that cultural injustices cannot be reduced to economic injustices: the former are based on institutionalized forms of misrecognition that prevent social groups from equal participation in political life; the latter stem from class division and have their root in the economic structure. Why then does Fraser claim in "*Cannibal Capitalism*" that racism is rooted in the structure of capitalism, or even that it is coessential to it? Isn't there a danger of falling back into a reductionist and economistic view of racism?

3. POLITICAL DIAGNOSIS

This brings me finally to the third level of questions I would like to raise, those relating to the political diagnosis opened up by Fraser's analysis. I would like to ask questions closely related to the previous ones.

Fraser elaborates a very complex and suggestive account of the populist moment. In her framework there is a polarization between neoliberalism, on the one hand, and populism, on the other.

The question is therefore the following: Is this account not in danger of overemphasizing the existence of a clear anti-neoliberal tendency, in all populist movements, and of neglecting instead the often detectable symbiosis between regressive and authoritarian drives, on the one hand, and a model of possessive individualism pushed to the extreme, on the other? A symbiosis that motivated the reading of the new right-wing populisms as the expression of a new form of «libertarian authoritarianism»? Furthermore, could we not deem the authoritarian populisms of the present as being an expression, rather than of economic malaise and revolt by the losers of globalization, of cultural backlashes and defensive reactions by those seeking to maintain ideological structures of status privilege (racism, sexism, etc.)?