

FRASER'S CAPITALISM: DEFINITION, CRITIQUE AND TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses some aspects of Nancy Fraser's book *Cannibal capitalism*, focusing in particular on the description of the capitalist social order proposed by Nancy Fraser. One of the main issues that is raised in Fraser's book and that is discussed in this article is the following: on what grounds can be said that the expropriation, in addition to being a condition of possibility of the formation of capitalism, is also a structural necessity? Is, in principle, capitalist exploitation possible without expropriation?

KEYWORDS

Capitalism, Exploitation, Expropriation, Socialism, Social Reproduction

Nancy Fraser's volume on cannibal capitalism is, in my opinion, an extraordinary book. It addresses the crucial questions facing any thinker who proposes to develop an emancipatory social critique today. Few books have the ambitions that characterize Nancy Fraser's theoretical project. Indeed, her text seeks to offer us at least three very important things: a definition and description of capitalism; a critique of it; and a reflection on how capitalism can be transformed to create a better society. What Fraser accomplishes in her book is, of course, a very difficult and complicated task. *Cannibal Capitalism* has the merit of distinguishing itself from both more limited normative analyses and simple descriptive analyses. The strength of Fraser's book also lies in the fact that it holds together the analytical dimension and the critical-normative one; it is a necessary approach, but one that is rather rare today. My brief commentary will be divided into three points related to capitalism: analysis, critique, transformation.

ANALYSIS AND DESCRIPTION OF CAPITALISM

To develop her analysis of capitalism Fraser follows a very clear and logical method: she starts from the Marxian analysis of the capitalist mode of production,

and broadens this analysis by including all those dimensions of socio-economic life which are necessary for capitalism to exist, and which therefore constitute, as we say in the language of philosophers, its conditions of possibility.

The essential features of Marxian capitalism are summarized by Fraser as follows: it is a mode of production that is based on (1) the private ownership of the means of production and the class division between owners and producers; (2) the institution of a free labor market; and (3) the dynamic of capital accumulation premised on an orientation toward the expansion of capital as opposed to consumption, coupled with an orientation toward making profit instead of satisfying needs. Capital's "drive to unending self-expansion" is "an overriding imperative inscribed in an impersonal system"¹.

The first condition of possibility of capitalism is that it must be able to buy labor-power and use it to increase the value of capital. But who produces this particular commodity that is labor-power? Labor-power is produced first of all through the sexual act and procreation, and then through all those activities (such as raising children, feeding the worker, etc.) that we can gather under the term "social reproduction." Capitalism could not subsist without these social reproduction activities, which in modern society are largely carried out within the family and are motivated for "affective" reasons, not through the buying and selling of services (which is a small part of social reproduction). This has two implications: first, modern capitalism clearly differentiates the workplace from the family (two completely separate spheres, unlike, for example, in agrarian societies). Second, capitalism, Fraser argues, is also supported by reproductive labor for which no wages are paid. But it is not accurate to argue that reproductive labor, since it is not wage labor, is not paid: it is paid insofar as those who perform it receive a livelihood; but, in the patriarchal family, the problem is that this livelihood is controlled by the man and that reproductive labor is unequally divided. But this organization of reproductive labor serves capitalism, because if it were turned into services to be purchased in the market, workers' wages would have to be much higher. If it were provided much more broadly by the state, on the other hand, taxes would have to be much higher. So it is important for capitalism that reproductive labor retains this "voluntary" and "affective" status.

Second condition of possibility is the existence of a state apparatus that performs a number of indispensable functions for the benefit of capital: maintaining law and order internally; developing a policy of power and influence externally, with all the major economic consequences it entails, from simple appropriation to the conquest of markets²; providing and distributing all those

¹ N. 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. 4.

² "Here we find further structural divisions that are constitutive of capitalist society: the "Westphalian" division between the "domestic" and the "international," on the one hand, and the

goods that it is not convenient to produce capitalistically, but which are essential for capitalist production, such as large infrastructures; providing assistance and welfare to enable wages to be kept low and to contain social protest or discontent. Thus capitalism requires a political apparatus distinct from the economic sector (unlike many societies of the past). In theory, as ultra-liberalists would have it, almost all functions performed by the state could be commoditized (even the police, for example, could be replaced by the purchase of private security services); but this would be socially unsustainable and certainly not compatible with democratic equality among citizens.

For Hegel, civil society could not exist without the family and the state; we can say that capitalist production would not be possible if it were not supported upstream and downstream (above and below) by the provision of services in the family and the provision of goods and services by the state. Capitalism is not self-sufficient but needs to be backed up by these two supports, with the consequences we shall see later.

The third condition of possibility is the free availability of fundamental natural resources. These are regarded as expendable at will, without the duty to replenish them, as if they belonged to no one: for example, water or clean air, or raw materials that are appropriated extractively and taken away from the availability of future generations. Without this free appropriation profitable production would become much more difficult.

The fourth condition of possibility is mere expropriation, which for Fraser, far from being confined to the origins of the system, is an intrinsic feature of capitalist society, as constitutive and structural as exploitation. But if it is clear that expropriation is necessary for the formation of capital, because capital, as Marx said, was certainly not formed through savings and abstinence, in what sense can expropriation be considered a structural feature of capitalism? I will discuss this point later.

Several questions can be raised with respect to these *four conditions of possibility*.

a. The first question I would like to pose is as follows. It seems to me that the four conditions do not stand on the same level. The reason is that it seems clear that capitalist production could not really exist without the production of labor power in the household and the production of public goods (e.g., roads) and services by the state. These seem to be two necessary conditions for capitalist production to exist (I use the word "necessary" in its common meaning, as we do

imperialist division between core and periphery, on the other - both premised on the more fundamental division between an increasingly global capitalist economy organized as a "world system," and a political world organized as an international system of territorial states" (Fraser, *Cannibal capitalism*, p. 14)

in ordinary language; certainly it is a complicated concept, but this is not the right occasion to analyze it).

Free exploitation of natural resources and expropriation do not seem equally necessary. For example: one could establish a legal status for resources that constitute common property, and put an end to free and destructive use, for example, of clean air. This would not mean (in my view) killing capitalism, although it would put it in trouble.

As for expropriation (as distinct from exploitation) on the basis of what arguments can it be said that it is a structural necessity for capitalism? In other words, on what basis can we say that expropriation is not only a characteristic of "historical capitalism", as Immanuel Wallerstein calls it, or of really existing capitalism, but is a structural necessary feature of capitalism in general? "What is not so clear, however, - asks Nancy Fraser herself - is whether imperial expansion is structurally integral to capitalism, and if so, how the expropriation of dependent, subjugated peoples relates to the exploitation of (doubly) 'free workers'."³. Fraser's response on this point does not seem entirely convincing to me, for two reasons.

The first is a reason for the coherence of the theory: if the Marxian theory of exploitation is right, if therefore capital can accumulate through the exploitation of free labour, on what basis can we argue that expropriation is a structural necessity? If Marx is right (if...: I do not say that Marx is right) then capital, after its take-off, can also do without expropriation.

The second plea relates specifically to Fraser's argument. It is evident that the capitalists have "a deep-seated interest in confiscating labor and means of production from subject populations"⁴. Of course they prefer to have something free rather than paid! It is fair to say that in crisis situations this need is even stronger. But from the fact that expropriation is very desirable for the capitalists, and that they try to expropriate whenever they can, it does not follow, in my opinion, that it can be considered a structural and necessary condition of exploitation. To put it briefly, even if historically the two phenomena have always been linked, an exploitation without expropriation is perfectly conceivable; while an exploitation without the production of labor-force and without care work is not even thinkable. In other words: there may be no more wealth in the world to steal or workers to enslave, but that does not seem to imply the impossibility of capitalism.

b. The second question I would like to ask is whether we should not also consider "cultural" conditions to make the existence of capitalism possible. The first, which seems to me to be really important, is the appropriation of the scientific and technical knowledge (one could perhaps speak of *general intellect*)

³ Ibid., p. 33.

⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

that is essential for capitalistic innovations, but it is something that capitalism does not produce itself (or does so only in a small part). Capitalism appropriates widespread knowledge that is produced in many venues (e.g., universities, but not only), and it appropriates it mostly without paying for it.

Another different cultural condition of existence of capitalism is the consumerist ideology, which capitalism in part helps to produce and without which it could not live.

c. A third broader and less specific question that could be raised is the following: for Fraser, capitalism is an *institutionalized social order* characterized by a number of distinctions or differentiations that are also dependencies. First, the social system is distinguished from nature considered as a kind of ahistorical material substratum. Second, the sphere of economic relations is distinct from both that of political power and that of family and reproduction; within the economic dimension, relations of exploitation are distinct from those of expropriation. At this point, says Fraser, we have an “expanded view of capitalist society”. But is this expanded view a complete or partial view of capitalist society? It seems to me that it is a partial view but, given its expanded character, we are not very far from a complete view. If we take as a common thread the modes of coordination of social actions of individuals, we can say that in capitalist society we have three basic and “structural” modes of coordination: family, market and state; and three modes of coordination that arise on a voluntary basis in the civil society (or in the life-world, according to Habermas): interindividual non-formal relations, more or less formal associations (such as churches, parties, movements); and finally the sphere of culture, science ect. With respect to this hypothesis, my question is: Is Fraser's theory a partial theory that could be completed? And if so, how?

WHAT'S WRONG WITH CAPITALISM

“In general, then”, Fraser argues, “the narrow view ascribes three chief wrongs to capitalism: injustice in the sense of class exploitation; irrationality in the sense of propensity to economic crisis; and unfreedom in the sense that democracy is undercut by social inequality and class power”⁵. Curiously, there is no mention of the critique of capitalist society in terms of *alienation* (in the dual meaning of alienation of the worker and alienation of all individuals from the hostile foreignness of social processes).

Fraser's most original thesis is the reformulation of the critique of irrationality, which is reframed in the terms of *cannibal capitalism*, that is, *capitalism devouring*

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 146-147.

itself. Capitalist exploitation, in order to subsist, needs the four conditions that Fraser highlighted, but it tends at the same time to destroy them and thus to destroy itself.

I propose a few considerations on this aspect.

First, it should be noted that the fact that it harbors within itself contradictory tendencies *is something that has always characterized capitalist economics and its instability*: for example, in order to increase exploitation capitalism needs to reduce wages (which is still the case today!) but, by doing so, it undermines itself, because capitalism also needs to increase workers' consumption. This problem has been answered historically with debt, mortgages and so on, but (as we have seen) these create other and no less serious problems. So capitalism, in a sense, has always cut the branch on which it sits.

But this issue seems to be particularly acute for neoliberal capitalism. For it pursues the ever-widening marketization of the satisfaction of needs and spheres of life, while instead manifestly depending - for its survival and social sustainability - on being sustained upstream and downstream by non-mercantile modes of provision of goods and services (from those organized by the state to those based on family and community solidarities). And the more these modes (the state and care) shrink, as it happens in neoliberalism, the more the capitalist economy itself comes into crisis.

The same argument can be made for the exploitation of natural resources, where capitalism risks exhausting the very sources on which its continued existence depends. Marx had already noted this point when he reflected on the intensive exploitation of the soil, which destroys its fertility.

And this is also true, by definition, of expropriation, because the more one expropriates, the less is left to be expropriated.

In a sense, then, capitalism has always been cannibalistic, but it has always risen again from its ashes. So, unless the unlikely and undesirable prospect of collapse is realized, how can things be changed?

TRANSFORMATION (AND SOCIALISM)

The goal, of course, is always to overcome “not ‘only’ class domination but also asymmetries of gender and sex, racial/ethnic/imperial oppression, and political domination across the board”⁶. To do this certainly requires bringing about changes within each individual sphere (for example: democratizing the enterprise, de-patriarchalizing the family, etc.), but the big change needed would be the

⁶ Ibid., p. 151.

restructuring of relations between spheres. In capitalist society there is a primacy or dominance of the economic sphere and consequently of economic power, to which the other spheres are functionalized (even politics) although not without resistance, as Fraser herself notes. The issue is very complicated but, to make a long story short, one could say that Engels was right, all things considered: there is a kind of dominance in the last resort (*in letzter Instanz*) of the economy or rather of capitalist power (I repeat: not without contrasts, limitations and resistance).

Thus it could be said that in order to achieve the ends of socialism, that is, the suppression of injustices and privileges as well as the construction of a more satisfying form of life, what is required is not only the transformation of each individual sphere, but also an overcoming of the hierarchies between them or, as one might say in Habermas' language, a new *balancing* of the relationships between the different spheres. "Whereas capitalist societies subordinate the imperatives of social, political, and ecological reproduction to those of commodity production, itself geared to accumulation, socialists need to turn things right side up: to install the nurturing of people, the safeguarding of nature, and democratic self-rule as society's highest priorities, which trump efficiency and growth."⁷

This means that the environment in which we live cannot be functionalized to the imperative of economic growth; that politics cannot become the mere servant of the imperatives of the financial capitalist economy; that reproduction cannot be subordinated to production.

This certainly requires increasing the weight and role of politics⁸ over that of other spheres; but at the same time, if we are not to substitute one alienated power for another, increasing the role of citizens and a spontaneous civil society (a Habermasian theme) at the expense of an autonomous and self-referential political system.

If we wish, these transformations can be called socialism. But the important thing is to always maintain the awareness, which has been lacking in the tradition of "scientific socialism", that there is not just one resolution to the evils of injustice, domination and exploitation; for the solution that purports itself as the only true one, could as well turn into a new form of domination. And so perhaps the only possible socialism is the work of Sisyphus that challenges and deconstructs the present forms of injustice, exploitation and domination which, for their part, always tend again to reconstitute themselves in different ways.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁸ "Finally, a socialism for the twenty-first century must democratize the process of institutional design. This means making the design and scope of societal domains a political question. In short, what capitalism has decided for us behind our backs should now be decided by us via collective democratic decision making. Thus, we ourselves should engage in what legal theorists call 'redomaining': redrawing the boundaries that demarcate societal arenas and deciding what to include within them" (*Ibid.*, p. 153).