

“I am not a Post-Marxist: I am a Neo-Marxist”: Interview with Nancy Fraser

“Non sono post-marxista. Sono neo-marxista”. Intervista a Nancy Fraser

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Abstract. Fraser is one of the most important American philosophers and one of the leading figures of contemporary critical theory. From the 1980s to the present, Fraser has published on political philosophy and social theory, reflected upon feminism, justice, and capitalism, and has participated in public debates on current issues. The interview aims at retracing the main themes of her thought, underlining the persisting link which joins her understanding of political philosophy with social critique and public engagement. The interview also emphasizes the developments of her thought, starting from her formation in the American New Left, the encounter with feminism and the neo-Marxist cultural critique of capitalism, and the discussion of Habermas’s thought. Also discussed is Fraser’s complex feministic theory and her post-Westphalian and three-dimensional model of global justice. Another crucial topic is the recent elaboration of an enlarged view of capitalism, based on a combination of Karl Marx and Karl Polanyi, aimed at highlighting its structural crisis tendencies: not only economic, but also ecological, political, and social. The recent debate on the crisis of liberal democracy, the emergence of populism, the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the Ukrainian war, become an opportunity to test how a renewed critical theory of society can develop a social diagnosis of the time, without abandoning the task of a reconstruction of the emancipatory potential present in the existing social reality. Finally, Fraser recalls her link with the Italian philosophical tradition, stressing in particular her debt to Antonio Gramsci.

Keywords: Fraser, critical theory, feminism, capitalism, justice, socialism, left-populism.

RIVISTA ITALIANA DI FILOSOFIA POLITICA 4 (2023): 99-122

ISSN 2785-3330 (print) | DOI: 10.36253/rifp-2278

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Riassunto. Fraser è una delle più importanti filosofe americane e una delle figure di spicco della teoria critica contemporanea. Dagli anni Ottanta ad oggi, Fraser ha pubblicato testi di filosofia politica e teoria sociale, ha riflettuto su femminismo, giustizia e capitalismo e ha partecipato a dibattiti pubblici su temi di attualità. L'intervista si propone di ripercorrere i temi principali del suo pensiero, sottolineando il legame persistente che unisce la sua interpretazione della filosofia politica con la critica sociale e l'impegno pubblico.

Parole chiave: Fraser, teoria critica, femminismo, capitalismo, giustizia, socialismo, populismo di sinistra.

Giorgio Fazio [=GF]: *Since the beginning of your long intellectual journey, your theoretical work seems to have been animated by two underlying purposes that only partly overlap.*

On the one hand, your intent has been to contribute to the critical reconstruction of Marxism, overcoming the reductionist, economic, and teleological versions of the orthodox Marxism. Coming from the American New Left, you wanted to put the analysis of the forms of domination and social suffering, which orthodox Marxism occluded, back at the centre of the Marxist critique of capitalist societies: issues such as gender and sexuality; colonialism and postcolonialism; ecology; and political exclusion. This orientation has made you sympathetic with the most fertile strands of the neo-Marxist cultural critique of capitalism, such as those developed in the early twentieth century by Gramsci and the Frankfurt School, and then in the second half of the twentieth century by Anglo-Saxon cultural Marxism, Marxist feminism, Black Marxism, post-colonial studies, and the Marxist critique of political ecology.

On the other hand, however, your work has been equally animated by the intent to formulate an innovative critical theory of society, as well as a new theory of justice, capable of entering into dialogue with many other strands of contemporary philosophical-political debate. This second side of your theoretical commitment has prompted you to elaborate a theory that has clearly detached from Marxism. It is significant in this sense that you have defined your social theory as neo-Weberian, rather than neo-Marxist. By embracing the theory of social differentiation and the irreducible difference between class and status, you wanted to make a radical break with any “over-totalized view of capitalist society as a monolithic ‘system’ of interlocking structures of oppression that seamlessly reinforce one another,”¹ as you wrote.

¹ Fraser, “Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism,” 183.

In light of this detectable tension in your theoretical production we would like to start this interview with the following question: If you were to define your theoretical position from the outside, starting from your beginnings, would you characterize it as neo-Marxist or rather as post-Marxist? Or would you characterize it as a combination of these positions? And what meaning do you give to these terms?

Nancy Fraser [=NF]: This is an interesting and important question. Clearly, the answer depends on what we mean by Marxism, and of course, that opens a huge can of worms. To simplify, let me say that the Marx who has always interested me is neither the philosopher of history nor the philosophical anthropologist nor the political economist, but rather the Marx who was trying to develop a critical theory of capitalist society. So you see, I am rejecting the premise of your question; I do not accept the distinction you drew between Marxism and critical theory. The Marx who has inspired me is the one who proposed an account of what capitalist society is and how it works – how it generates, in a non-accidental way, fault lines of injustice, forms of perversity, irrationality, and crisis. By my definition, that is critical theory, and it is a project I have tried to advance. Of course, to advance it today requires going beyond the specifics of Marx's critical theory – first, in relation to the present, because capitalist society today is very different from the society that Marx analyzed; but also, second, because even the society that Marx analyzed requires more attention to what I have called “the background conditions for accumulation.” Marx certainly knew these conditions were there, but he did not focus on them in a systematic way. And that is precisely what I have tried to do by developing an expanded conception of capitalism. But I have never considered that work “post-Marxist,” let alone anti-Marxist. Far from refuting Marx's critical theory, I have tried to extend and revitalize it.

You are right, however, that I once characterized my thought as neo-Weberian. But I did not mean to say that it was therefore non- or post-Marxist. I was saying rather that it was not premised on the sort of base/superstructure economic-reductionism that some of my critics associated with Marxism. The context was the controversy over my claim that capitalist societies institutionalize injustices of both class and status, neither of which are reducible to the other. In saying that, I was arguing simultaneously against two mirror opposite views: reductive economism and reductive culturalism. At one point, I became involved in a debate about this with Judith Butler. She had attributed to me the economic base-superstructure idea that distributive injustices were “real” or primary, while status injustices were merely epiphenomenal or secondary. That was a misreading on her part. It was in order to correct it that I invoked Weber on

the non-reducibility of status and class. But I doubt that I am now or ever was a real Weberian in any deep sense. I only found it useful to describe myself as such for polemical purposes – to stress that my approach was neither reductionist nor economicist.

Still, I must admit that there is more to my relation with Weber than polemics. In fact, my account of capitalist society does stress its institutional divisions and normative differentiations, aspects that I have pursued in a more systematic way than, let us say, Marx did. Those matters are central to my recent work, including *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory*,² with Rahel Jaeggi, and my newest book, *Cannibal Capitalism*.³ In those books I have stressed the background conditions of accumulation, thereby situating capitalism's economy more emphatically in relation to the family, to the state, to nature, to the imperialist political order, and the colour line. The implication is that the capitalist life form is not homogeneously and pervasively stamped by one action logic or one normative ontology – such as “the commodity form” as Lukács suggested in his famous essay on reification. Rather the capitalist order necessarily encompasses a plurality of action logics and social ontologies. I can well understand why this view can be called neo-Weberian. That is fine with me as long as we understand that the “value pluralism” sits within and arises by virtue of a single overarching societal order. It is not just a simple pluralism, then, but a pluralism that it is institutionally grounded in a structured totality.

The key point for me is this: to the extent that I can rightly be described as a Weberian or neo-Weberian, it is only insofar as that does not contradict Marxism or at least the neo-Marxism that I have been developing and embracing. I am not a post-Marxist: I am a neo-Marxist who has incorporated some of Weber's insights while reworking them in a Marxian frame.

GF: *In your path of research aimed at renewing the critical theory of society, a crucial role has been played by your critical debate with Jürgen Habermas. From your earliest articles – one could mention your seminal “What's Critical about Critical Theory?”⁴ – you have identified Habermas's theory as a privileged reference of your research. You have addressed many criticisms to his positions. For example, from the very beginning you criticized Habermas's understanding of the public sphere, arguing that he did not take seriously the issue of gender as well as the classist character of*

² Fraser and Jaeggi, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory*.

³ Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*.

⁴ Fraser, “What's Critical about Critical Theory?”

*the idea of the bourgeois public sphere. More recently, you have criticized Habermas for constructing a social theory that “relies on systems-theoretic ideas about functional differentiation to such an extent that he removes the economic sphere from the realm of criticism.”*⁵

However, it is difficult to deny that some of your basic orientations arose from the reception of Habermas’s communicative turn of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School’s origin. As an example, one could trace to the reception of Habermas’s thought your early interest in the subject of the public sphere, your deliberative vision of radical democracy and justice, centred on the principle of equal participation in social life. But perhaps, a Habermasian matrix can be recognized in other aspects of your theory as well: the neo-Weberian view of social differentiation, the related idea that in the study of society it is necessary to adopt a dualism of perspective, combining structural and interpretive approaches. Also of Habermasian origin seems to be the awareness, absent as such in the first generation of the Frankfurt School, that a contemporary version of critical theory must know how to make its normative foundations transparent, without on the other hand ever losing its connection to an emancipatory instance of intra-mundane transcendence. How would you define your relationship with Habermas’s critical theory?

NF: This is another beautifully posed and complex question with many aspects. Let me start by affirming your premise that Habermas is and has been a privileged reference point for the development of my thought. I was introduced to the tradition of Critical Theory very early in my intellectual development, as an undergraduate in the late 1960s, when I studied with Richard J. Bernstein. Habermas was just then emerging as a major thinker, and his early essays on “theory and praxis” made a deep impression on me, as did the writings of Herbert Marcuse, who was then a hero of the US New Left. Later, when I began my PhD work, I naturally gravitated to the thought of Habermas, but also to that of Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty. Those three thinkers were my lodestars. I devoted many years to puzzling out where I stood in relation to each of them and trying to integrate insights from each that were widely viewed as incompatible. I mention Foucault and Rorty here in order to signal that I always was (and still am) ambivalent about the idea that critical theory must make its normative foundations transparent. On this point I am closer to Rorty than to Habermas. Like Rorty, I reject both Foucault’s anti-normativism and also his moral-philosophical foundationalism. So I have kept my distance from the normative-transcendental pole of Habermas’s *Theory of Communicative*

⁵ Fraser and Jaeggi, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory*, 5.

Action. I have been content with a modest historicist meta-account of my first-order normative commitments, including my view of justice as participatory parity. That stance coheres with my quasi-pragmatist impulse, which prioritizes first-order critical theorizing “with practical intent.”

Given that orientation, I was drawn especially to three major works of Habermas. These are not the books that most democratic theorists would now single out, but they remain formative for me. One is certainly *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which, as you rightly noted, I subjected to an appreciative critique.⁶ What drew me to this work was Habermas’s conceptualization of the public sphere as an institution of capitalist society. This I consider a major discovery, on a par perhaps with Marx’s discovery of exploitation. Previously publicity had been seen through a certain ideological haze, which treated the questions of freedom and democracy as free-standing, not structurally connected to questions of political economy and labour. Habermas cut through that haze by theorizing the public sphere as a “bourgeois” institution that necessarily stands in a tense relation to other institutionalized arenas of capitalist society. To this day, I consider this idea extremely important, and I would like some day to return to it, to bring it into relation with some other related ideas – such as Gramsci’s idea of hegemony and Althusser’s ideological state apparatuses. These too were efforts to theorize discursive contestation in twentieth-century capitalist society. And I would like to consider whether and how we can use any or all of them now in the twenty-first century, with its further “structural transformations” such as digitalization, social media, and “post-truth” trends. So yes, I remain interested in themes I developed in conversation with Habermas: subaltern counter-publics; strong versus weak publics; and whether and how public opinion can be legitimate and efficacious today.⁷ But the main point that I want to stress is that public sphere theory is for me a dimension of the larger project of a critical theory of capitalist society. I would not reduce it to a theory of deliberation or deliberative democracy.

I should probably say at this point that my least favorite book of Habermas is *Between Facts and Norms*.⁸ That book has been received precisely as a theory of deliberative democracy, one in which the critique of capitalist society drops out of the picture. The book itself does not altogether ignore that larger societal framing, but it does attenuate it, and in that sense it probably bears some responsibility for its “politicist” reception. “Politicism,” by the way, is a term I coined as an analogue of econ-

⁶ Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* [*Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*].

⁷ Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere.”

⁸ Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung* [*Between Facts and Norms*].

omism or culturalism – it is the idea that the political is free-standing, capable of being understood on its own terms, disconnected from the wider society – that it can be reformed or democratized on its own, without broader societal transformation. That is a mistake, in my view. The political, like the economic, is one constitutive arena of capitalist society. And it is co-institutionalized with others – the family,” “the market,” “nature” – and cannot be understood in isolation from them. This politicist side of Habermas, or perhaps I should say, of his readers, effectively reduces the project of a critical theory of capitalist society to free-standing political theory. That is my least favorite side of his oeuvre.

But let me return to the *Theory of Communicative Action*,⁹ which like *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, is another major touchstone for me. I am not thinking of the lengthy “weak transcendental” argument for discourse theory in Volume One, but rather of the last chapter of Volume Two about the “inner colonization of the lifeworld,” where Habermas outlined a full-scale institutional critique of the capitalist society of the time. Reading that was a thrilling experience for me. Certainly, I had plenty of objections to the way he did it, which I laid out in the article you mentioned, “What’s Critical about Critical Theory?” But they were premised on a deeper agreement: what Habermas was trying to do in that last chapter of Volume Two was precisely what I thought critical theorists should be doing: disclosing how capitalism is institutionalized and functions in our time, and how and where it generates fault lines and precipitates conflicts. That was something I thought worth engaging with, just as I thought that the public sphere was worth engaging with. By contrast, I never wrote about *Between Facts and Norms* because its problematic did not inspire me.

Now I come, finally, to the third work of Habermas that I have engaged with, *Legitimation Crisis*,¹⁰ which offered a crisis theory of capitalist society. Although it is a work of the 1970s, it became important to me recently, when I became convinced that neoliberal capitalism was in crisis and that we needed to revive crisis theory in order to clarify it. In this situation, it seemed important to me to return to Habermas’s book and see what conceptual resources it offered. *Legitimation Crisis* was largely inspired by the New Left, and the seeming defection by a whole generation from the consumerist, careerist, and bureaucratic ethos of postwar capitalism. That “withdrawal of legitimation” seemed to Habermas to portend the return of crisis in capitalist society, after a period in which capitalism appeared to many to have overcome its crisis tendencies. In this new situation, he sought to parse the sources and dynam-

⁹ Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* [*Theory of Communicative Action*].

¹⁰ Habermas, *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus* [*Legitimation Crisis*].

ics of a new form of crisis (a legitimation crisis) in a way that clarified prospects for an emancipatory resolution. Writing in the early seventies, Habermas could not know that the crisis would be resolved by the advent of a new, “neoliberal,” form of capitalism. But he asked all the right questions. Focused on the prospects for regime transformation, he evaluated the capacities available within the social-democratic order for managing, deferring, and defusing crisis. For Habermas, the contradictions of capitalism that Marx had disclosed, with respect, for example, to the falling rate of profit, had not been overcome but merely displaced, and were coming out in another way. In my view, the displacement hypothesis is too simple because, as I argued in *Cannibal Capitalism*, the system harbours multiple contradictions – not just economic, but also ecological contradiction, social-reproductive, and political. These are equally deep-seated, not mere displacements of a more fundamental economic contradiction. So, again, I do not endorse the exact way he did it, but the fact still stands that Habermas was trying to do just what I think critical theorists should do.

These, then, are what I consider his three major contributions – public sphere theory as an institutional theory about capitalism, legitimation crisis as an attempt to theorize capitalist crisis in the social-democratic phase, and the inner colonization theory as another attempt to understand the new forms of conflict generated by a new form of capitalism.

Angela Taraborrelli [=AT]: *You have always used feminism as a perspective from which to criticize both capitalism and more orthodox Marxism, and you insisted that in order to overcome gender subordination one needs to develop a theory of justice capable of combining the feminist politics of recognition with a feminist politics of redistribution. Your goal was ultimately to “retrieve the best insights of socialist-feminism and to combine them with a non-identitarian version of the politics of recognition.”¹¹ Can you explain what a “non-identitarian version of the politics of recognition” means, and in what sense this approach is necessary to the struggle against gender injustice? How has more strictly Marxist feminism reacted to your criticism of feminisms and related proposals? To touch on a thorny issue: what do you think about the practice of surrogacy? Could the feminists who defend it not be called “handmaidens of neoliberal capitalism”?*

NF: I want to start by saying that feminism was the entry-point to rethinking Marxism for me. Once you have the perspective of social reproduction and reproductive labour, suddenly the whole picture of what

¹¹ Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, 9.

work is and what is necessary to capital accumulation changes. That was how I started to think about resituating the familiar Marxists paradox of labour exploitation in factories against the broader picture of capital society. But I should say that one could arrive at that same insight from the ecological problematic; it leads to the same place. For me feminism came first *biographically*. And that is the first point, so to speak.

When I came from the New Left to the second-wave feminist movement as a new leftist who was already a Marxist, I of course gravitated to the socialist version of feminism. And lots of debates and arguments against other currents of feminism – liberal feminism, a kind of radical feminism that sees patriarchy as the sole and primary force of oppression and thought of capitalism as secondary and unimportant – those were all the old debates within socialist feminism in the US. Now, the problem of redistribution and recognition. I can see now, looking back, that it might have been specific to the US, because more than other countries and regions the US faces a problem in what I call the politics of redistribution and recognition: we are very deeply disarticulated and separated from one another. And so we had to face a very intense argument in which a current of orthodox Marxists could only see feminism as some kind of cultural problem; and a lot of feminists could only see Marxism as an economic problem. Both these views are distorted and wrong, in my opinion. So, I was making an argument to show why it was necessary to articulate these points of view and bring them together, and that the whole idea of a sharp division between the *economic* and the *cultural* was itself an artifact of capitalism. I tried to show in each case why you could not have anything that would count as a real recognition without a restructuring of political economy, and you could not have deep cultural change without a political-economical transformation. That is the impulse. And in those years, I was also thinking a lot about the theory of justice against the background of the raging debate within analytic philosophy between Rawls, Dworkin, Sen, and so on – then of course came the works of Taylor and Honneth on recognition – so I was framing the questions that worried me from the standpoint of the theory of justice; but for me they were also problems of social theory, of how to understand capitalism. Often, I meet people who read that work of mine as if it were only about the theory of justice, in the freestanding moral philosophical sense – and I can certainly understand why it appears that way – but really, I was thinking in terms of social theory about *why* these things had become separated. I thought, “this is not a simple mistake; it has grounds in the actual social order that we live in.”

As for surrogacy, I guess I want to say that surrogacy as it exists today could absolutely be considered a kind of neoliberal practice. It has a strong

class dimension, because we find that the people who do the gestational labour involved in surrogacy are often poor women, like migrant women from overseas. They do not get much, but the intermediaries who manage the contracts do: it is a profit-making business. Would I say that in a different social system surrogacy would necessarily be a problem? I am not sure. I am agnostic. I certainly do not want to start with a moral condemnation that it is always wrong. This would require a different kind of discussion about whether surrogacy is simply wrong or is wrong *now* because it is tied up with exploitation and commodification.

AT: *We would like to better understand your position on “intersectionality.” On the one hand, you recognize the importance of the contributions of Black feminists who have produced illuminating analyses on the intersection of class exploitation, racism, and women’s oppression, as well as queer materialist theories that have highlighted important links between capitalism and the oppressive reification of sexual identities; however, on the other hand, you criticize the theories of intersectionality because they would be too descriptive, “focused on the ways in which extant subject positions crosscut one another.” Instead, your approach would be “explanatory”: starting from the observation of the social order that generates them, it seeks to identify “the institutional mechanisms through which capitalist society produces gender, race and class as transecting axes domination.”¹² Do you think that, in order to overcome the problem of fragmentation of the politics of intersectionality, it is sufficient to unify the different sub-units through the identification of a common perpetrator of the injustices suffered because of class, gender, and race, a common enemy, namely capitalism? Why should the struggle against capitalism be more unifying for women than the struggle against patriarchy?*

NF: This is a complicated question. First of all, it has now become much clearer to me that there are many different theories of intersectionality. There is a very nice book about this by Ashley Bohrer called *Marxism and Intersectionality* (2019),¹³ in which she goes through all the different interpretations of intersectionality, and I think we have got to the point where I cannot even say that intersectionality is *one* thing anymore. Intersectionality originally developed as an attempt to show why the specific situation and forms of oppression experienced by black women could not be understood through a feminist point of view alone, nor from a critical race theory point of view or an anti-capitalist point of view alone,

¹² Fraser and Jaeggi, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory*, 135.

¹³ Bohrer, *Marxism and Intersectionality*.

because these things could not be separated. That was an important step: it showed the need for a different kind of analysis. Then it became a more general question about (at least in one version) how to understand the interlocking relations between capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. That version, to me, seemed to assume that we have three different systems and that the problem lies in how to bring these systems together. I do not agree with this. I do not think there are three different systems: I think there only is one system, though internally differentiated and complex. And to understand how a complex system generates asymmetries of gender, of race, of class, and so on – you will never get there if you start with three different things. This is my opinion.

The other point – and this is a common criticism – is that intersectionality, at least in one version of it, focuses mainly on the distinctive subject positions that different groups of people occupy. It does not tell us what produces those subject positions or how they are produced; and I am looking precisely for a deeper explanatory account of how, for example, black women come to occupy their current position. In a way the Marxist account of how the system generates class is a good example of this – I mean of an explanatory account as opposed to one that is merely descriptive – and could be applied to gender, race, as well as the “intersections” between them.

The last thing I want to say on this topic is that today the word “intersectionality” is being used by everyone; it has almost become a buzzword. In fact, not so long ago I heard a speech by Kirsten Gillibrand, a US Senator from New York, who talked about intersectionality... It is like “deconstruction”: everybody uses it. But to me, this popularity is good. It indicates a desire, a hunger for an integrative perspective. It shows that people are no longer satisfied with various siloed, single-issue movements. People appreciate the fact that we need some broader set of alliances, a way of coordinating struggles; and the use of the word “intersectionality” (even though, theoretically, the word does not go far enough) is a marker of this desire.

AT: And do you think that anticapitalism can unite these different “sectionalities”?

NF: There are two points to be made. From a theoretical point of view, I do believe capitalism is what unites, and I believe that it is not possible to fully overcome racism or sexism within a capitalist world, because they are all rooted in it. This is not to say that overcoming capitalism alone would be sufficient, but it is necessary. Now, is it a politically viable strategy? It depends. Probably, a few years ago, no. However today a lot of peo-

ple are becoming radicalized, especially young people, and I think they have a sense that, whatever their main interest – be it ecology, or Black Lives Matter, or the Me Too movement – what they do (or want to do) is anti-capitalist. This is a big difference from the way things were fifteen of twenty years ago; maybe it started around the 2007-2008 financial crisis. I am not sure, but I see it.

The kind of feminism that has developed in places like Spain, Argentina, Brazil – to some extent Italy, though I am less sure; but a lot of Southern Europe and Latin America anyway – takes it for granted that it is an anti-capitalist movement, and they want to build a popular feminism for which class is very central. Something like this is going on in the ecological movement, too. There is a kind of divide between the green capitalist liberal wing and people concerned about environmental racism and injustice, enclosures, etc. So, I think what is happening in a lot of social movements is that we are seeing the development of anti-capitalist wings, which suggests to me that some kind of popular common sense is developing, that the anti-capitalist framing is increasingly important and a point of connection between these movements.

Now, I tried to take this a step further in the Benjamin Lectures that I gave in Berlin last June, and which I am still revising. I tried to think about whether we should return to the concept of class, now refined in a much broader way: no longer in a way that centres the experience of the exploited industrial factory worker but one which takes the broader conception of labour developed in the feminist movement and in various popular economy movements which are concerned with informal economy, popular economy, solidary economy, and all the forms of non-waged labour that are essential to social reproduction. Maybe we have a different way of thinking about what it means to work, what it means to be a worker and to be part of a working class; in fact, I do not believe that right now many people are ready for such a move. But I am interested in exploring it, though I do not know how things will develop. Obviously, when you talk about what is a good form of discursive articulation you have to be very sensitive to where people are and what they are experiencing, what their common sense can support and what not – this is again a Gramscian problematic – and again, I am not sure exactly *where* we are. But I do think anti-capitalism is becoming increasingly the marker in terms of which people understand that not all feminisms are the same and that there is a divide that has to be made, or that not all environmentalisms are the same. That does seem to be developing and to me it is a positive development.

GF: In your later works, you elaborated a large-scale social theory of capitalism. You accomplished this task by elaborating a neo-Polanyian

“enlarged conception of capitalism,” which problematizes the relation of the capitalist economy to the non-economic presuppositions on which it is based, and which it purports to destabilize, that is, social reproduction, non-human nature, and political power. According to you, the capitalists’ drive for unlimited accumulation threatens to destabilize the social, natural, and political processes that capital requires. The effect over time may be to undermine the basic conditions necessary to the capitalist economy. In any event, you have reiterated that for you what is problematic is not the modern differentiation between economy, state, family, and nature per se, but the destructive form that social differentiation takes in capitalist societies. Could you explain this point? And once you note that you do not deny the emancipatory potential of modern social differentiations, how should we differently institutionalize modern social differentiations? On the other hand, does not your focus on the self-contradictory relationship between the economy and non-economic social spheres risk marginalizing the analysis and critique of political economy and of the systemic and inherent logic of capitalism?

NF: First of all, let me say that in making this Polanyian turn, so to speak, my idea was to bring together the two Karls: Marx and Polanyi. I thought of Polanyi as the great theorist of the destructive and contradictory relations between different institutions within capitalism. So, for example, for him the big problem was the relation between economy and society. I personally think “society” is too general a term; I would rather talk about economy and polity, economy and nature, economy and community, and so on. But I agree with his idea – and by the way, the same idea can be found in certain currents of the Marxian tradition, Rosa Luxemburg for instance – that the official economy, the monetized economy, expands not only through the surplus labour hours for which wage workers are not paid, but also through a lot of uncaptialized wealth that is syphoned or extracted and funnelled into the system. So, I do not see this as marginalizing the analysis of political economy, the system logic: I see it as a friendly amendment to what the system’s logic is.

Another way to put this is to consider that even if we accept the orthodox definition of surplus value as those hours which the worker works beyond the time it takes to generate the value necessary to sustain the living cost, we still need to start paying a lot more attention to profit, because profit involves more than surplus value. Surplus value is one contributing element to profit, but there is also all the unpaid reproduction cost of natural inputs, of energy, of raw materials, and the general environmental conditions that production degrades and does not replenish nor repair. There is also all the unwaged and often gendered social reproductive labour, forms of community sustenance that are still for most of the world outside

the wage nexus. All this contributes to profit, and I would say most capitalists have never even heard of surplus value: what they are interested in is profit, and if we want to understand what they are doing and why, we need to broaden what we mean by the critique of political economy and not just focus on surplus value. I think if we do that, we will get a different accounting of what productivity is and how much destructivity it depends on. So, this is a friendly amendment or correction to orthodox Marxists' critique of political economy. My latest book uses the metaphor of "cannibal capitalism," because this process of syphoning or extracting wealth from those regions of society which are outside the official economy but still very much inside capitalism are cannibalized in a non-accidental way, that is, as part of the system's logic. To me that connects those problematics which we talked about earlier. It leads to a cannibalization of social reproductive energies, of political capacities for organizing the public aspects of our lives, cannibalizing nature, and specifically those populations who have been deprived of the ability to defend themselves against conquest or enslavement, or extractivism, or dispossession – including dispossession through debt. So, I do think that the system creates all those marvels of increased productivity that the surplus value story tells us about, but it does so against a much larger backdrop of destruction. I see as an expanded critique of political economy, not an alternative to it.

AT: You argue that in a globalized, post-Westphalian world, disputes that usually centred on the question of "what" is owed to members of political communities in matters of justice have also turned into disputes about "who" should count as a member and what community, or structure, is to be considered.¹⁴ Therefore, it is necessary for justice theory to include the political dimension of representation alongside the economic dimension of distribution and the cultural dimension of recognition. Distribution highlights the impediments to equal participation in capitalist societies due to obstacles rooted in the political economy, recognition describes the obstacles rooted in a status order, and representation describes the obstacles rooted in the political constitution of society. The latter, in particular, allows us to highlight two types of political injustice: the one that arises within the political community bounded by borders, and the one that you call "meta-political." Could you explain what this meta-political injustice consists of?

NF: Let me start answering your question by saying that, in the modern world, to the extent that anybody has an experience of having some responsiveness to claims for justice, these claims have found their only

¹⁴ See, for example, Fraser, *Scales of Justice*.

addressee in the state of their country. It is completely understandable: all our politics has been constructed around the idea that the addressee of justice claims is the state, the national state. This has not served well indigenous peoples, or ex-enslaved peoples and their descendants, and in many cases women too. In fact, one could even say that what working classes have gotten out of it has been somewhat limited, although they have been more successful. But it is completely understandable that that is the first thing that occurs to people, in a struggle for justice. It is also completely understandable that electoral campaigns are one of the few moments in our lives where you can have a broad discussion about alternatives. They are not the best alternatives, usually, but it is the discursive arena in which people begin to try to narrate what is going on, what the problems are, what should be done, and so on. So, the national framing of struggles for justice and democracy makes perfect sense. In the end however it is not adequate because we know that not all states and nations are equal. The United States has the dollar, and the dollar is world currency: we can just print more and more of it and not have to deal with the same questions of national debt like everyone else. But there are countries with failed states or very weak states that do not have a political capacity, let alone the revenue, to actually address the needs of their populations, even if they wanted to – and many of them are of course criminal and do not want to. This is the problem of the “metapolitical”: that the world is not simply divided into different, side-by-side states, that equally recognize one another, as the Westphalian picture would suggest; it is divided along imperialist and neo-imperialist lines in which some states have been systematically emptied and cannibalized of political capacity and of wealth. Under these conditions, a struggle for justice within a wealthy and powerful state will involve injustice to people outside of it. I would say that a lot of the benefits that American and European workers enjoyed in the social-democratic era depended on revenue syphoned from what was then called the Third World or the global South. So, in a sense, we are going to depend upon organized political forces in the global South to not let us repeat that. We are going to have to figure out some new alliance, and it is not going to be easy because plenty of people in the global North will say that we cannot afford that, that we are going to lose. What we have to say is that “actually, you are going to win.” Just as white workers in the United States would have had more to win than to lose by a cross-racial alliance with black and indigenous workers, so today the white populations that are ravaged by opioid addiction, gun violence, suicide, and unemployment have more to win by a global transformation of the system. If they cannot see that, then we must argue it. It is up to us to make that case. It cannot be done the other way.

AT: *Do you think that this metapolitical level needs metapolitical institutions?*

NF: Yes, I do. I do not know what these institutions are. We are trying to imagine something that is very different from what we have – and this does share something with cosmopolitanism – in which we have to understand that we want a world in which there are multiple levels of organization, coordination, governance. The trick is to figure out which question can be treated at a small local scale, which at a larger urban scale, which at a regional or national scale, and which need to be addressed at a global scale. And how to have institutions at each of those levels that connect with one another, including – and this was my final thought in the essay on the metapolitical – democratic institutions that deal with this problem, that is, the problem of which scale is appropriate. Metapolitical institutions where people talk and think and figure out whether a certain issue is better addressed as a national or local issue.

GF: *In The Democratic Paradox,¹⁵ Chantal Mouffe argues that the liberal democracy is the result of the articulation of two logics, which are intrinsically incompatible: the democratic logic of popular sovereignty, on the one hand, and the liberal logic of individual liberties, on the other. Against this idea you embraced explicitly Habermas's idea, as formulated in Between Facts and Norms, of a circularity within democracy between public autonomy and private autonomy. How do you reconcile this conception with your embrace of left-wing populism? And how do you reconcile the national-popular concept of the people, as mediated by all versions of populism, including left-wing populism, with the internationalist perspective that in your view must orient the issue of justice in the post-Westphalian world?*

NF: Contrarily to many liberal thinkers, populism is not necessarily a negative term to me. I do not think it has to override individual liberties. It may be so in a capitalist context, where the paramount liberty is property ownership; but I start with the idea that populism is an anti-elitist feeling or sensibility that finds expression in many forms, including some that might become democratic socialist if they develop in a good way. It is a rejection of the rule of elites, and in the current situation it even takes on an anti-corporate, anti-neoliberal tone – not everywhere, but especially in the global South. It takes on an anti-imperialist tone. Now, it is true that when things go badly, populism can degenerate into antisemitism and all

¹⁵ Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*.

kinds of problematic views: it becomes too concrete in trying to characterize who the elites are, who the oppressive forces are, and identifies them with a specific cultural, religious, or racial identity. But I think that the anti-corporate impulses of populism are potentially very positive. I spent some time yesterday with some Argentines, who are socialists and feminists, but some of them still claim to be Peronists. Which shows that there are other populisms where these things are not at odds with one another.

I also want to say something about Mouffe, whose work I admire in many respects. Her account of this, however, is much too politicist: she is focused on two logics of politics, popular sovereignty and individual liberty. This is the classic antithesis of “equality versus liberty.” Now, if one takes social theory seriously and puts it in the framework of a capitalist society, one cannot stick to just what the political logics are. This has to be understood in relation to the actual forms of oppression, predation, cannibalization and injustice that people are facing. So, I am not a populist, but I am not against it either. I want to explore the possibility that left-wing populism is a transitional form that could evolve toward democratic socialism – maybe I am a Trotskyist – but I am intent on distinguishing left-wing from right-wing populism, because they are rather different. But the interesting question is whether it is possible for a left-wing populist movement to win people away from right-wing populism: *that is the important political question*. And this cannot be done by insisting on liberalism or any other perspective that does not validate the legitimate grievances that right-wing populists have. They misconstrue these grievances, they misdescribe them, they blame the wrong people, but they are also victims. A lot of people do not want to see them that way, but the only political hope to win them is to validate them.

GF: *Your very complex and suggestive account of the populist moment nevertheless raises some questions. Are you 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, for example, Wendy Brown to read the new right populisms as the expression of a new form of “libertarian authoritarianism”?*¹⁶

In your framework of a polarization between neoliberalism, on the one hand, and populism, on the other hand, and at variance with your account that in order for neoliberalism to become hegemonic in countries

¹⁶ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*.

with a social democratic tradition it had to introject mainstream progressive thrusts, could it instead be argued that, historically, the neoliberal project has become hegemonic precisely through an authoritarian populism such as that of Thatcher, as studied for example by Stuart Hall?¹⁷ 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.)?

NF: First of all, I disagree with Stuart. It is true that Reagan and Thatcher were the initial *embrace* of neoliberalism, but neoliberalism was not consolidated by Thatcher in Britain, it was consolidated by Blair; nor was it consolidated by Reagan in the US, but by Bill Clinton; and in Germany by Gerhard Schröder and the social democrats. The point about neoliberalism is that it is a political economy, and as such it can articulate with many different political formations. It can articulate with Islam, in some countries. It can articulate with Hindu nationalism. It can articulate with liberal feminism and liberal anti-racism and gay rights, as it did in my country and many other places. It really depends on where we are at, but I think the idea that it is only a project of the conservative right is too convenient, frankly. It suggests that our enemies are all in one place, and that we can beat the neoliberals and the conservative right in one blow: unfortunately, no. Unfortunately, they all have many different bases of support. Now, we should distinguish the class-basis within the base of support for one or another kind of neoliberalism. I am only interested, from a political point of view, in the working-class base of the populist versions of the neoliberal project. I am interested in the working class of North England that voted overwhelmingly for Brexit, and in the Upper Midwest and Southern states that voted for Trump *after* many of them voted for Bernie Sanders, but when he was no longer on the ballot. That is a big part of the mass-base that now supports right-wing populism, which, by the way, wins this support by a kind of anti-corporate anti-elitism. For instance, there is currently a huge battle going on in the state of Florida between Disney, which owns Disneyworld and is the largest employer in the state, and the Governor, Republican Ron DeSantis, who is planning to run against Donald Trump for the Republican nomination in the next presidential election. DeSantis is playing the cultural war game – the “we cannot teach about racism in schools, because that makes white students feel bad about themselves” game – and he has gone after Disney, which has a gay and trans-friendly corporate culture. They gave benefits to gay

¹⁷ Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal*.

couples, for example, long before any court decisions were made requiring that. We have a lot of corporations in the United States and the world whose profit strategy requires appealing to one class of consumers who care about these progressive causes. So, there is this huge battle being fought between corporate Disney and the values it represents – pro-gay rights, teaching about racism at school, etc. – and a sort of Trumpism without Trump, DeSantis being a more palatable figure than Trump but one who can still run on the same themes. Two enemies who are fighting each other: it is the Gramscian analysis about how to think about the way the political field is constructed. And in general, a large part of international corporate capital is “progressive.” They *are* progressive neoliberals. How they intervene politically in different countries is another matter, and it is true that in the United States we may have a version that is different from the Italian version.

GF: *Your expanded conception of capitalism wants to also be a critical theory of crisis. In what sense can this theory offer a theoretical framework for analyzing the recent pandemic crisis? And in the face of new movements that have emerged in the pandemic – for example, the German anti-lockdown “Querdenken movement,” or more generally the anti-vaccination movements – do you think it is necessary for a critical theory of crisis to reflect also on epistemic crisis? Or do you think that the main problem during the pandemic – and more recently also in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict – has been a reduction in information pluralism and the expulsion of critical voices, phenomena that have dangerously pushed the dissent towards radicalization paths?*

NF: Concerning the pandemic, the cannibalization model that I have developed is in some way a form of expanded crisis theory: it not only covers economic crisis but also social reproductive crisis, political crisis, ecological crisis, and so on – and I analyze the pandemic as a kind of perfect storm where all of these crisis tendencies converge. I think it was kind of a lesson in social theory which, if read correctly, shows that we are in a kind of a general crisis – a rare occurrence in history – in which these different tendencies have erupted in an acute form and exacerbate one another. So, I went through the idea that the ecological dimension of capitalist crisis was very significant in producing the virus in the first place, because it was essentially tropical deforestation and global warming that caused the species migration that made for the zoonotic leap and the transfer of the pathogens from bats to humans, eventually. We are going to have a lot more pandemics, unfortunately, because of these tendencies. Then I also thought that the sort of austerity politics which was

forced on us in recent years by neoliberalization really meant a disinvestment in public health infrastructure and the privatization of public health infrastructure, so that many states divested of hospital capacity, of distribution and manufacturing capacity, and devolved all that to the corporate sector, so that we now have vaccines which are patented even though they were developed through government-funded research. This has harmed our capacity to deal with the public health crisis. In Italy, you had that horrendous outbreak in Bergamo, and we in New York, in Queens: these were the first killing fields, and there were no ventilators, no masks, and nurses and doctors were having to reuse the same gloves. All this, in what are supposed to be the wealthy countries of the world. It was truly pathetic. Then we had the lockdown and the whole question of social reproduction, this huge new burden of how to keep things functioning – work, education, and so on – and the problem of the “essential workers” who, other than those in the medical field, were the people working in the food industry and in the distribution industry: basically, the low-waged service workers, who are largely immigrants and people of colour. We saw all of those dimensions of the crisis, the crisis of work, which opposed the one third and the two thirds of society, so to speak. And it just seemed to me that we could see how every form of cannibalization in every domain converged in this horrific experience. I think this is a good illustration of the “two thirds problem” which I just mentioned.

Now, to the epistemic crisis. This is really important and really interesting. It takes us back to the populism question, I think. You, Giorgio, posited two alternatives earlier: either people are being economically cannibalized or they are motivated by status, the anxiety about losing status – the backlash against the supposed advance of people of colour, who are actually not advancing at all: no one is. This is part of that anti-elitism. In our country, the great demon was Tony Fauci, this very distinguished epidemiologist running the Centers for Disease Control. Fauci is an unusual scientist, who has very good communicative skills, and he was on TV all the time for this, which brought him to clash with Trump. Trump would take the stage and talk about these insane ideas he had about treatment, and you could see the pain on Fauci’s face. In this dramatization, the idea of Trumpism versus other elites, Fauci came to stand for all the forces of progressivism that the populists hate. So, when scientists like him start telling you that you need to mask-up, you need to get vaccinated, and so on, they will reject that on principle and say the opposite. Now, something interesting is that in the US we had a strange coming together of the right-wing anti-vax with an older new-age left-wing anti-vax – women who think that if they give their children vaccinations, they will get autism. This is interesting because the left has already lied to us about Vietnam,

about radiation poisoning, and all kinds of things: the government lied, and the left developed a somewhat paranoid and somewhat justified suspicion of what the experts are telling us, which the right took up. So, there is an epistemic crisis, but it is connected to this larger problem of narratives, at least among some part of the right-wing populist base, that rewrite and re-signify legitimate grievances so as not to blame corporate capital but the immigrants, the Mexicans, trans people. They are enablers in the bicoastal elites, as we call them, the high-ranking neoliberal democrats. The point is: there is no epistemic solution. These things are too intertwined and we are not going to find a solution until we also solve the status and class problem, which are also intertwined.

GF: *The international crisis that has erupted in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has already given rise to heated debate. In Germany, Jürgen Habermas has intervened with a lengthy essay.¹⁸ Among other things, he formulated the thesis that the history of the twentieth century gives reason for the Besonnenheit (prudence) of German policy, and that it would be a mistake to adopt a moralistic attitude. However, he reiterates the need to adhere to the principles of international law and to sustain Ukraine. From another point of view, Habermas has been harshly criticized by historian Timothy Snyder. His charge is that Habermas has said nothing about World War II, which instead must continue to be the starting point of any discussion of German responsibility. According to Snyder, this would be evidence that his reasoning suffers from a neo-colonial bias against Ukraine. What do you think of this debate? And what is your position toward US policy? Do you agree with Michael Walzer, for example, who defends US intervention in Ukraine by invoking the principle of democratic national self-determination?*

NF: My view about the current war in Ukraine runs quite strongly against the mainstream view in the US and in much of Europe. My view is that this is a proxy war between Russia and the United States, fought over the bodies of the Ukrainians, and that behind this proxy war is another, between the US and China. It is a problem about declining US hegemony, and this general crisis also has a global dimension, in that every phase of capitalism to this day had been organized by a hegemonic power. According to Giovanni Arrighi, we had the Venetians, the Dutch, the British, then the United States. Now, the US is a declining power: it has the military strength, but it does not have the economic power of the past – a power that China is beginning to amass – and it has lost a lot of

¹⁸ Habermas, “Krieg und Empörung.”

its moral credibility. These are the pillars of global hegemony: the moral, the military, and the economical. But the US is not willing to accept its own decline. So, something else is going to happen. We are going to have a multipolar world – and one of the questions is whether Europe will step up to the plate and be one of the poles or whether it will continue to hide behind the US, and whether China will emerge, when and how, and whether the US will accept that. So far, US foreign policy, including the Biden administration, is dominated by people who are absolutely unwilling to accept the rise of China. This is how I see the larger situation of what this is really about. Then, on a more specific level, the US-driven expansion of NATO, step by step, to the doorstep of Russia, is a hugely aggressive and provocative policy. We could have and should have after 1989 done what we did in 1945: we should have had a Marshall Plan for Russia and Eastern Europe. Instead, we split off the more western parts of Eastern Europe from the Soviet bloc and little by little have been pushing Putin into a corner, which is like waving a red flag in front of a bull. I am in no way defending Putin. He is a war criminal and an autocrat, but the US has a very heavy role in this and, as always, it causes trouble and then leaves others to pick up the pieces: we invaded Iraq, destabilized the whole Middle East, and left Europe to deal with the refugees. We are always breaking things and leaving others to deal with the fallout, which is what we are also doing now. And the sad thing is that in the US today the most eloquent voice against this policy does not come from the left, but from political scientist and international relations expert John Mearsheimer, who is quite brilliant about this. We used to have a great left-wing feminist organization on foreign policy, called Code Pink, which was terrific on Iraq and Afghanistan: not a word from them about Ukraine. Total silence. This is a disgrace. There is no left critique at all. And the most obvious slogan would be something like “No to Putin. No to NATO”: who is saying that? Nobody. This is the real crisis of the left.

GF-AT: *Our journal is called Rivista italiana di filosofia politica, and we would like it to be a kind of bridge between the tradition of Italian political philosophy and the wider international community of political philosophers. Almost all your books have been translated into Italian and have aroused a great deal of interest, not only among scholars. May we ask you what your relationship to Italian culture is, and which aspects of it you consider relevant for both your work and the wider international discourse?*

NF: I like this question, but I have to say that it causes me a little bit of embarrassment because I do not speak Italian, I do not read Italian, and I have spent less time in Italy than I have in France, or Germa-

ny, or several other places. So, I cannot claim to have any real organic personal connection to Italian culture, but there are certainly some figures who stand out for me as being very important. I would have to start with Antonio Gramsci, who has been a major signpost in my development as a thinker and as a neo-Marxist. A few years ago, I taught a whole seminar on Gramsci – a graduate seminar – and I would like to do that again. I am very interested in his conception of hegemony and the problem of counter-hegemony and building a counter-hegemonic bloc: these concepts are central in my thought. I am also very interested in the concept of subalternity, as a way of thinking about different forms of subordination that do not all fall into one category but that might be brought together intellectually and politically. The whole problematic of the so-called Southern Question, for Gramsci, is a kind of paradigm of the whole problem of counter-hegemony for me, of what it means to bring together a constructive bloc of different political forces, different class forces, and all that shapes the political side of my work. It shapes my thought about how critical theory can intervene and advance the kind of thinking that, I believe, would be politically helpful. And the non-reductive side of Gramsci is very important to me, too: how to have a neo-Marxian critical theory that takes the cultural dimension seriously, that is attuned to the specific empirical national aspects of political life, without losing the dimension of political economy. I do not deal with these questions in the exact way Gramsci did, but he is an exemplar for me. Then, maybe I should also say something about my relation to Italian feminism, which I admire in many respects – or at least I admire some elements, especially the so-called workerist and post-workerist traditions of Italian neo-Marxism. I am not a student of that development. I cannot describe it in any detail, but one day I would like to explore more closely my relationship to the thought of figures like Silvia Federici – who I understand had been in the US for a long time, so I am not sure she counts as an Italian feminist anymore... I do not think I have any specific debts to Italian feminism, but I am interested, and I would like to know more about it. I am a big fan of Italian opera, Italian food, Italian fiction – I read a lot of Italian novels. So, I would love to get to know Italy better. That is the best answer I can give you.

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