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TOPOGRAPHIES OF CAPITAL

Gender, Class and Nature in Fraser's Critical Theory

TODAY, NANCY FRASER may fairly be called the leading socialist feminist of the Anglophone world. Emerging from a background in social philosophy and critical theory, she has produced a body of thought as striking for its radical, totalizing ambitions as for its conceptual clarity and lucid exposition, and impressive not least for its consistent development, in continuous engagement with historical reality. The critiques of French post-structuralism, American pragmatism and latter-day Frankfurt School theory in *Unruly Practices* (1989), where Fraser first developed her concept of a gendered politics of need; the landmark exchanges with Judith Butler, Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell over the 'linguistic turn' in *Feminist Contentions* (1995); the sophisticated critique of a politics limited to affirmative-action and cultural-difference agendas in *Justice Interruptus* (1997); the debate—which Fraser very much gets the better of—with Axel Honneth in *Redistribution or Recognition?* (2003); the expansion of notions of representation, redistribution and recognition to the transnational level in *Scales of Justice* (2008), calling for a voice for the global poor in the aftermath of the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq; the watershed critique of neoliberal 'progressivism' in *Fortunes of Feminism* (2013); the path-breaking analysis of the combined economic, political and ecological crisis that has unfolded over the past decade, in *The Old Is Dying* (2019) and Fraser's latest book, *Cannibal Capitalism* (2022)—the range, depth and vitality of this work speaks for itself.

In the course of this, Fraser has managed to combine a high-level international teaching career—as Loeb professor of politics and philosophy at the New School, with visiting professorships *inter alia* in

Paris, Frankfurt, Amsterdam, Berlin, Vienna, Cambridge—with unfailing radical commitment. Again and again, she has been to the left of prevailing intellectual wisdom: insisting on economic as well as cultural critique at the height of the post-structuralism boom; breaking decisively with Clintonite feminism; arguing against the inequities of financialized capitalism—the younger generations reeling from ‘crushing debt, precarious work, besieged livelihoods, dwindling services, crumbling infrastructures, hardened borders, racialized violence, deadly pandemics, extreme weather and overarching political dysfunctions’, as she puts it.¹

At the same time, Fraser’s literary and intellectual approach is an unusual one for the left. Trained in analytic philosophy, her method involves positing sets of conceptual distinctions, whose logics she then unfolds. Often these categories are shorthand terms for complex strategic perspectives or political-philosophical ideas: ‘justice’, with its Rawlsian ring; ‘recognition’ and ‘redistribution’; the domains of ‘the cultural’ and ‘the economic’. They are related to each other through elegant geometries, generating further abstractions—ideal-types, paradigms, modes, remedies, claims. As Fraser has argued: ‘Only by abstracting from the complexities of the real world can we devise a conceptual schema that can illuminate it’—‘for heuristic purposes, analytical distinctions are indispensable.’² On the left, however, there is often an instinctive sense—not ungrounded—that analytic philosophy is an alien form. Critics have argued that Fraser’s categories are *too* abstract; that she does not engage sufficiently with the historical and empirical complexities of her subject matter.³ This essay, though, is interested instead in what

¹ Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System Is Devouring Democracy, Care and the Planet—And What We Can Do About It*, London and New York 2022, p. xiii; henceforth CC.

² Nancy Fraser, ‘From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a “Post-Socialist” Age’, *NLR* 1/212, July–Aug 1995, p. 70.

³ Fraser herself has some sympathy with this perspective. In a footnote on ‘class’, explaining that for purposes of analytical contrast she is using the term in a ‘highly stylized, orthodox and theoretical way’, she acknowledges that in other contexts she herself would prefer a fuller interpretation that gave more weight to the cultural, historical and discursive dimensions of ‘class’ explored by Edward Thompson or Joan Wallach Scott: Fraser, ‘From Redistribution to Recognition?’, p. 75, n. 15. For representative samples of critics demanding more empirical evaluation, see Hester Eisenstein’s review of *Fortunes of Feminism* in *Science & Society*, vol. 80, no. 3, July 2016, or Nanette Funk, ‘Contra Fraser on Feminism and Neoliberalism’, *Hypatia*, vol. 28, no. 1, Winter 2013.

her heuristics have to tell us about capitalism itself and the interrelation of its economic, social, geopolitical and environmental crises. First it is necessary to trace the development of her approach.

Making of a feminist philosopher

Fraser was born in Baltimore in 1947. Her father, a second-generation immigrant of Lithuanian Jewish descent, was an importer of kidskin gloves; her mother was from a mixed family, part Russian-Jewish, part Irish Catholic, long-settled on Maryland's poor agricultural shore; both were 'FDR liberals'. A precocious student, Fraser was frustrated with the limits of a 'middling' public-school education and won a place to study classics at Bryn Mawr, where she discovered a passion and aptitude for philosophy. Caught up in the ferment of the civil-rights movement, then the protests against the war in Vietnam, she joined the SDS Labor Committee and was a full-time militant for five years following graduation. Going back to school in 1974, after the movement had wound down, to begin doctoral work on continental philosophy at CUNY, this activist experience distinguished her from her younger peers among critical-theory students, who had come of age amid the political confusions of the Ford–Carter years and were keen to do away with what, for them, were the exclusionary grand narratives of class dialectics. Fraser, too, was enthused by the energies of the new movements and the post-structural revolution, but always adopted a 'both/and' approach: discourse theory *and* Marx, Habermas *and* feminism.

The argumentative structure of her doctoral thesis set the template.⁴ Taking a group of texts—Tocqueville's *Recollections*, Victor Hugo's *Napoleon the Little*, Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*—Fraser set out to determine a means of adjudicating between 'competing descriptions of social reality', in this case, that of the revolutionary year of 1848. Faced with a choice between the critical, the empirical and the narrative, she concluded that the three dimensions were not independent: rather, 'each presupposes the others and none is foundational with respect to the others.' Visible already in this early work were two defining traits of Fraser's philosophical approach: a tendency to transcend dualisms by the addition of a third category that

⁴ Nancy Fraser, *Adjudicating Between Competing Social Descriptions: The Critical, Empirical and Narrative Dimensions (With an Application to Marxism)*, PhD Thesis, City University of New York 1980.

mediates between the assumed opposition, while corresponding to, or overlapping with, elements of each group; and a rejection of any hierarchy of causation in favour of a pluralistic descriptive method, shifting in response to the social reality it encounters. Typically, she would distinguish analytically clear categorizations and then apply a dialectical logic to describe the complex imbrication of social kinds, with a view to uncovering an emancipatory dynamic.

Descriptive sensitivity formed the heart of Fraser's critique of Jürgen Habermas in a germinal 1985 essay, 'What's Critical About Critical Theory?'.⁵ Her starting point was the young Marx's definition of critical theory as the 'self-clarification of the struggles of the age': if those struggles included women's fight for liberation, then a critical theory worthy of the name should shed light on the structures of oppressive gender relations and the prospects of the feminist movement. Examined in that light, Habermas's construction fell short. Fraser was entirely at home amid the sometimes bafflingly technical terminology of the three-volume *Theory of Communicative Action*, handling its models with confidence. As a young feminist philosopher, she found much that was helpful in Habermas's critique of the advanced-capitalist welfare-state societies of the 'long upturn'. But where Habermas drew a sharp, though layered, distinction between an exploitative system and an innocent lifeworld, Fraser used the gendering of domestic labour, waged work and political participation to demonstrate the complex inter-relations of domination and family life. Habermas's androcentric view of the nuclear family and failure to theorize the gendered dimension of social power risked eclipsing the positive and useful aspects of his thought, Fraser argued: his interpretive view of human needs, his distinction between 'normatively secured' and 'communicatively achieved' action contexts, his four-term model of public/private relations.⁶

Beyond her political commitment to women's liberation, Fraser's designation as a feminist philosopher is attributable not so much to a strong engagement with the corpus of feminist writing, contemporary or historic, but to the centrality of domestic labour, welfare and the economic role of the family in her social theory, which places the 'woman

⁵ 'What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender', *New German Critique*, vol. 44, no. 1, Spring-Summer 1985.

⁶ *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*, Cambridge 1989.

question' at the heart of her discussions of economic redistribution and identity recognition. The worsening position of women, especially black women, affected by the welfare cuts of the Clinton era, at a time of soaring asset wealth, drove the production of 'Genealogy of Dependency', a paper co-written with Linda Gordon, and the programmatic 'After the Family Wage', a thought experiment about emancipatory models of social reproduction that would help to deconstruct gender. Fraser's canonical text, 'From Redistribution to Recognition?', grew out of this 1990s experience. Demands for the recognition of gender, ethnic, racial and sexual differences were being forwarded in a world of worsening material inequality, environmental toxicity, falling life-expectancy rates. Justice required both recognition and redistribution, Fraser argued, as well as theorization of the relations between them. Focusing on 'race' (already scare-quoted in 1995) and gender, she contrasted 'transformative' programmes—the deep restructuring of relations of production and the deconstruction of underlying cultural-valuation dichotomies of 'race' and gender—to 'affirmative' ones: mainstream multiculturalism, affirmative action and welfare-state amelioration of inequalities within the existing economic and cultural system.

Fraser's refusal to prioritize norms and values over material determinants provoked a stinging response from Judith Butler entitled 'Merely Cultural'—not an expression that Fraser herself had ever used. Fraser agreed with Butler that 'the need to speak as and for *women*' had to 'be reconciled with the complementary necessity of continually contesting the word.' But she opposed the uncritical celebration of 'differences' among women and the failure to confront real conflicts of interest between them. She argued that the conjuncture urgently required the 'harmonization' of claims from social movements for recognition with those of class-based organizations struggling on the terrain of economic redistribution.⁷ A few years later, Fraser reiterated her belief in the interdependence of the subjective and objective, in an exchange with Axel Honneth: 'distribution and recognition do not occupy separate spheres. Rather, they interpenetrate to produce complex patterns of

⁷ Judith Butler, 'Merely Cultural', *NLR* 1/227, Jan–Feb 1998; Nancy Fraser, 'Heterosexism, Misrecognition and Capitalism: A Response to Judith Butler', *NLR* 1/228, Mar–April 1997; see also Anne Philips, 'From Inequality to Difference: A Severe Case of Displacement?', *NLR* 1/224, July–Aug 1997. Many of the engagements of this period are collected in the volume *Adding Insult to Injury: Nancy Fraser Debates Her Critics*, ed. Kevin Olson, London and New York 2008.

subordination . . . It follows that distribution and recognition can never be fully disentangled. All interactions partake simultaneously of both dimensions, albeit in different proportions.⁸

Crisis era

The major staging-posts of Fraser's thinking from the 1980s through to the watershed of the 2008–09 financial crisis are helpfully collected in *Fortunes of Feminism*, whose Prologue retrospectively presents the story of American gender politics over this period as 'a drama in three acts'.⁹ In Act One, an insurrectionary women's liberation movement emerged from the ferment of the New Left and joined with other radical currents in an attempt to overthrow technocratic Fordist capitalism. In Act Two, as utopian energies ebbed, feminism was drawn into the orbit of identity politics, just as a rising neoliberalism 'declared war on social equality'. Fraser settled accounts with the business-friendly feminism epitomized by Hillary Clinton in the 2009 essay, 'Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History'. In Act Three, just starting to unfold within the trough of the Great Recession, her hope was that feminism might regain its rebel spirit, while deepening its signature insights—'its structural critique of capitalism's androcentrism, its systemic analysis of male domination and its gender-sensitive revisions of democracy and justice.'¹⁰

Since then, Fraser has responded to the successive waves of struggles—environmental protests, Black Lives Matter, strikes, #MeToo, abortion rights—with a wide-ranging research project, developed in lecture series, seminars and essays, and now collected in two complementary books,

⁸ Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition: A Political–Philosophical Exchange*, London and New York 2004, p. 217. There are parallels here with Fraser's later critique of Polanyi, whose idealized view of 'society', moving to heal the wounds inflicted by the *laissez-faire* 'market', needed to be complicated by the dynamics of a third current, 'emancipation', alternately allied with the two other strands: Fraser, 'A Triple Movement? Parsing the Crisis of Politics After Polanyi', NLR 91, May–June 2013.

⁹ Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*, London and New York, 2013, pp. 1–16.

¹⁰ Nancy Fraser, 'Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History', NLR 56, March–April 2009, collected in *Fortunes of Feminism*; the quotation is from the volume's Prologue, p. 1.

Cannibal Capitalism and *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory*.¹¹

In this work, the capitalist social formation has become the explicit foreground, ‘the direct object of critique’. Her ambitions are political as well as theoretical: to conceptualize a crisis in which global warming, social breakdown, economic stagnation and political atomization are entwined, while also limning out a counter-hegemonic project sufficiently broad to coordinate the diffuse struggles the conjuncture has provoked. The types of practical and applied conclusions she suggests have also been radicalized over the past decade: from determining ‘just’ outcomes to inspiring political action aimed at dismantling capitalism *in toto*.

Read together, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory*—an extended dialogue between Fraser and the Frankfurt-trained social philosopher Rahel Jaeggi—and the more popular *Cannibal Capitalism* in turn expound and systematize Fraser’s argument for an expanded concept of capitalism. Fraser’s premise is that an understanding of the present crisis cannot be restricted to economic questions alone. She sets out to reveal the imbrication—a crucial term for her work—of the economic and the political, social and environmental dimensions of the crisis, writing for younger generations who had grown up without access to earlier critiques of capitalism, and for older readers who had never really integrated issues of gender, ‘race’ and ecology into their analysis.

In *Cannibal Capitalism*, a renewed *Kapitalkritik* necessitates a return to Marx, from whom Fraser borrows both a classical definition of the capitalist economy—defined by private ownership of the means of production, wage labour as the general means of subsistence and a competitive dynamic of accumulation—and the broader concept of capitalism as a social order. Methodologically, her starting point is that of *Capital*, Volume One, which progresses, she argues, by a series of epistemic shifts to reveal the ‘background conditions’ of capitalist accumulation. Marx begins, with his discussion of the commodity form, from the bourgeois standpoint of the sphere of circulation, the exchange of equivalents; but he soon shifts to a deeper perspective, that of the ‘hidden abode of production’, where capital accumulates not through

¹¹ Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory*, London and New York 2023 [2018]; henceforth, C:ACCT. Jaeggi, a former researcher for Axel Honneth, teaches social philosophy at the Humboldt and is the author *inter alia* of *Critique of Forms of Life* (2018).

equal exchange but exploitation—the non-compensation of a portion of a worker’s labour time, legally sanctioned by the labour contract. Finally, with another ‘equally momentous’ shift in standpoint, he reveals the background condition of production and exploitation to be primitive accumulation—an overtly brutal process of expropriation with no pretence of equal exchange.

Fraser’s move is to orchestrate further epistemic shifts, to help us see other background conditions for capital accumulation, this time in the non-economic realms—public authority, social reproduction, the natural world—on which capital depends. Or, as she puts it to Jaeggi, to take the Marxian method of looking ‘beneath’ a given socio-historical complex for its underlying conditions of possibility and apply it more widely. These non-economic zones are at once the overlooked ‘backstories’ to classically defined economic activity and sites for ‘emancipatory currents of critical theorizing’, whose lessons must be incorporated with those of Marx.¹² The central argument, developed thematically, is that activities performed in the ‘background’ should not be seen as secondary, but understood as essential features of the system. Capitalism entails not only the economic realm but the divisions of the world to which imperialist expropriations have given rise; the totality of un-waged work and the social reproduction of labour; the spoliation of non-human nature; and the political authority on which the extraction and circulation of profit depend—‘hidden abodes’, to which four central chapters of *Cannibal Capitalism* correspond.

Fraser has explained that she sees each of these background zones as arising concurrently with the capitalist economy, co-constituted by the rupture it imposed on a pre-existing unity.¹³ Thus, economic and political power had been fused in the figure of the feudal lord, who both expropriated the harvest and imposed his law; the advent of capitalism brought the separation of the economic and political spheres, the border between them constituting a zone of conflict. Similarly, in pre-capitalist subsistence societies, processes of production and social reproduction had formed a continuum, but capitalist industrial production established the domestic sphere as its other, giving pre-existing gender divisions a sharper modern form. Brute expropriation, not least in the world regions colonized by capitalist powers, imposed another

¹² C:ACCT, pp. 30–31.

¹³ C:ACCT, pp. 62–63.

structural division between exploited workers in the capitalist heartlands and expropriable others; again, Fraser argues, whatever earlier forms of xenophobic prejudice may have existed, racial difference was given its modern guise through capitalism's separation of the expropriated and the exploited. Likewise, capitalist production instituted a 'metabolic rift' in relation to the natural world, another contested division.

A central goal of *Cannibal Capitalism* is to illuminate the ways in which these background realms interrelate with the economic foreground and with each other, feeding into a broader crisis of capitalist society. Yet capitalism's dynamism, its restless expansionism and constant overshooting of state borders mean that Fraser's structural analysis must also be periodized historically and placed in a world perspective. Adapting Immanuel Wallerstein's world-system 'epochs', Fraser defines four 'regimes of accumulation': mercantile capitalism, roughly the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries; the liberal-colonialist, *laissez-faire* capitalism of the long nineteenth century; the Keynesian or 'state-managed' post-war regime; and the neoliberal era of credit-fuelled financialized capitalism. How do the broader dimensions of capitalist society—social-reproductive, environmental, political—articulate with capital's drive for accumulation across these successive regimes?

Production and reproduction

Fraser begins with two core capitalist dynamics: exploitation, through waged labour, and expropriation—the confiscation of natural resources and human capabilities, conscripted into the circuits of capitalist expansion. In the mercantile era, European expropriations proceeded both in the conquered and colonized lands of the New World, Africa and southern Asia, and—with the English enclosures and Scottish clearances—at home. Under the liberal-colonial regime, the growth of capitalist industry produced an exploited proletariat in the metropolitan centres, which gradually won the right to citizenship, suffrage and legal protections; this sharpened—and decisively racialized—the distinctions between exploitation and expropriation, which now mapped onto different world regions. Under the imperialist-capitalist world system, the two became mutually constitutive and tightly entwined: the exploited US citizen-worker acquired an aura of freedom by comparison to expropriated indigenous groups or chattel slaves. Globally, too, the distinction correlated 'roughly but unmistakably' with what DuBois called 'the colour

line'.¹⁴ The stark opposition between exploitation and expropriation began to weaken in the post-war period, under the impact of decolonization and civil rights. With the advent of financialized capitalism, Fraser argues, it underwent new shifts. Forms of debt-based expropriation expanded across the world, while manufacturing shifted to the South and East; former industrial workers in the advanced-capitalist countries were stripped of their relative privilege, amid falling real wages and rising household debt. The relation now was more of a continuum—a racialized spectrum of exploited-expropriated citizen-workers.¹⁵

Capitalism was always 'deeply entangled' with racial oppression, Fraser writes; the choice of verb allows her to unfold a continuous yet malleable historical relationship between shifting ethnic and phenotypical designations and dynamic socio-economic practices—from eighteenth-century slave plantations to multinational corporations, persisting into the 'deindustrializing, subprime, mass-incarceration' present. But if the structuring exploitation-expropriation division of populations that underwrote racialization is disappearing, might that entanglement start to prove contingent—a lingering residue of capitalism's history that no longer plays any real purpose? Is a non-racial capitalism now possible? Though no longer strictly 'necessary' to it, racial antagonisms are on the rise, Fraser notes. The financialized regime of accumulation generates intense insecurities and paranoias; the grievances of formerly 'protected' workers are more likely to find far-right expression—a toxic combination of 'sedimented dispositions, exacerbated anxieties, cynical manipulations'—faced with progressive neoliberal elites appealing to 'fairness' while subjecting them to redundancies and debt. A 'non-racial' capitalism based on ballooning inequality would still leave most in miserable conditions. A more transformative approach would aim to build a cross-racial alliance to eradicate both exploitation and expropriation—however far off that may seem at present.¹⁶

Fraser turns next to what she terms the 'crisis of care', expressed through social exhaustion and time poverty, as the energies needed for human replenishment are sapped by neoliberalism's economic pressures. The

¹⁴ Fraser acknowledges that historical realities were more mixed: there were sub-proletarian populations in the metropolitan centres, where the ranks of 'protected' workers were at first restricted to the so-called aristocracy of labour, just as there were waged workers in the colonies and peripheral zones: CC, p. 43.

¹⁵ CC, pp. 27–47.

¹⁶ CC, pp. 48–52.

'care' strand is so central to the broader crisis that none of the other strands can be understood without it, she writes. But the converse was also true: the social-reproduction crisis cannot be understood on its own. It needs to be grasped as an acute expression of an inherent contradiction under capitalism, taking varied forms in different epochs. The drive for accumulation continually cannibalizes the partially non-market activities on which capital relies for the reproduction of the labour force. Historically, this process began with the early industrial revolution, when women and children were dragooned into the factory—capital 'plundering' the domain of social reproduction, stretching the capacity for sustenance to breaking point. Middle-class moral panic and reformist labour organizing led eventually to 'protective' legislation, excluding women from the workplace, and a new gender imaginary of domesticity and female dependence—in the metropolitan core, the zone of exploitation. In the colonial world, the zone of expropriation, the ravaging of indigenous social-reproductive relations continued unchecked.¹⁷

In Fraser's telling, the post-war Keynesian regime of accumulation forged a novel synthesis of marketization with social protection—Polanyi's opposites¹⁸—which aimed to stabilize the economy-reproduction boundary under the high-wage, high-consumption Fordist model, based on the ideal of the male breadwinner and female housewife. Yet 'housewifization' denied the third key movement, emancipation, which Fraser insists should be added to Polanyi's matrix. From the 1970s, as both feminist critique and neoliberal assaults helped to weaken the case for social protectionism (never idealized by Fraser), these distinctions were re-forged. Under the emerging financialized-capitalist regime, emancipation was paired with marketization as a new form of progressive neoliberalism. Recruiting women into paid work while slashing funds for social provision, this forced further responsibilities for care onto households while diminishing their capacity to provide it:

The logic of economic production overrides that of social reproduction, destabilizing the very processes on which capital depends—compromising the social capacities, both domestic and public, that are needed to sustain accumulation over the long term. Destroying its own conditions of possibility, capital's accumulation dynamic mimics the ouroboros and eats its own tail.¹⁹

¹⁷ CC, pp. 53–62.

¹⁸ Fraser, 'A Triple Movement?'

¹⁹ CC, pp. 57–8.

The resulting crisis, Fraser argues, has produced an upsurge of ‘boundary struggles’, calling for public support around social-reproductive issues—healthcare, food security, parental leave. Yet if the root of the care crisis lies in capitalism’s social contradiction, it will not be resolved by policy tinkering. A deeper transformation is required, ‘reinventing the production/reproduction distinction and reimagining the gender order’ in ways that ensure both social protection and emancipation.²⁰

Nature and power

Turning to nature, *Cannibal Capitalism* finds another domain in which the regime of accumulation is devouring its own conditions of existence. Yet if there is a growing consensus that global warming constitutes an urgent threat, there is no agreement on what structural forces are driving the process nor on what type of societal change is required to alter course. Fraser argues that the relation between capital and nature is inherently crisis prone: capitalist production depends on nature as a source of raw materials and a sink for waste—yet it also posits a stark divide between the realm of the economy, as a field of human action, and that of nature as the realm of unthinking ‘stuff’. Capital’s expansionary drive for profits—unique to this mode of production, however environmentally destructive state-socialist regimes may have been—incentivizes capitalists to commandeer nature’s gifts, while absolving them of responsibility to replenish and repair. Capital’s relation to nature is thus intrinsically extractive, consuming biophysical wealth while disavowing externalities, piling up ‘an ever-growing mountain of eco-wreckage: an atmosphere flooded by carbon emissions, climbing temperatures, crumbling polar ice shelves, rising seas clogged with islands of plastic’—‘superstorms, mega-droughts, giant locust swarms, jumbo wild fires, titanic flooding; dead zones, poisoned lands, unbreathable air.’²¹

Fraser expands her reading of the historical sequence here to discuss ‘socio-ecological regimes of accumulation’, examining forms of energetics and modes of expansion—where and how the lines between economy and nature are drawn and what meanings are assigned to each. In the mercantile era, energy sources—wind, water, human and animal muscle power—were essentially continuous with pre-capitalist societies. The rupture lay in the new mode of expansion through expropriation:

²⁰ CC, p. 73.

²¹ CC, pp. 76, 81–83.

the conquest of new lands and labour, from the Potosí silver mines to the jute fields of Bengal and the plantations of Sainte-Domingue. The socio-ecology of the liberal-colonial regime was founded on coal and steam, with a new distinction drawn between the booming manufacturing cities and the emptying countryside. Industrialism vaunted the liberation of the forces of production from the constraints of land and labour, yet it rested on the extraction of ‘cheap nature’ from the periphery. Post-war Keynesian capitalism, seemingly less disreputable in other domains, oversaw a vast expansion in greenhouse-gas emissions through its novel combination of the internal-combustion engine and refined oil, highway construction and suburban living. The present financialized regime ‘scrambles energetic geography’, as Fraser puts it, but Northern ‘post-materialism’ still rests on processes of carbon-based mining and manufacturing, from Alaska to the Andes, Mexico to Shenzhen. Indeed, Northern consumption has become increasingly carbon-intensive—air travel, meat eating, concrete buildout—while expropriation has expanded into intellectual-property monopolies over seeds and plants.²²

Fraser makes her most passionate case here for grasping the different crisis dimensions as an interlinked whole. Environmental questions and social-reproductive ones are closely connected, she argues; both are concerned with matters of life and death. Social reproduction is simultaneously natural and cultural, managing the interface of sociality and biology, community and habitat. Environmentalism is unavoidably political: states choose how to police the boundary between economy and nature, regulating land use, emissions, mining and toxic waste. It is also entangled with the dynamics of expropriation and exploitation. Capitalism is the unifying figure that links them all. ‘The political implications are conceptually simple, if practically challenging,’ Fraser writes. A viable eco-politics needs to be anti-capitalist and trans-environmental, constructing a planet-wide counter-hegemony that can orient a broad project of transformation, connecting global warming to economic insecurity, the undervaluation of care work, the exorbitant costs of financial and environmental expropriation—and wresting the power to dictate our relation to nature away from a capitalist class primed for expansionary accumulation. The mainstream premise that the environment can be adequately protected without disturbing the structures

²² CC, pp. 92–102.

of capitalist society is false. A reductive ‘ecologism’ which sets all else aside to focus on carbon emissions fails to grasp that ecopolitics itself is being fought out in a global context riven by a broader social, economic and political crisis.²³

Turning, finally, to the question of politics, Fraser acknowledges the force of the diagnosis—by, *inter alia*, Wolfgang Streeck, Colin Crouch, Wendy Brown and Stephen Gill—of a crisis of democracy, in face of oligarchic corporations, supranational regulation and hollowing from within by market ideology. But she proposes a more fundamental contradiction between the imperatives of capital accumulation and the work of the state on which it relies: maintaining a legal framework, sustaining a currency, managing borders and international trade, building infrastructure, mitigating crises. Following Ellen Meiksins Wood, she understands the advent of capitalism as instituting a separation of the political and the economic, with each assigned its own sphere and means of operation; under capitalism, ‘the economic is non-political and the political is non-economic’. This meant that large areas of life were beyond democratic political control. The boundary of the economic and the political thus became a site of perpetual contention and potential crisis.²⁴

Under mercantile capitalism, the leading absolutist states—first Spain, then France—regulated commerce internally, but profited from external plunder and long-distance trade within an expanding world market; this international ‘value logic’ eventually fostered the urban merchant-capitalist strata which would rise against the *ancien régime*. Under liberal-colonial *laissez-faire*, a modernized political order instead limited itself to guaranteeing the conditions required for unfettered capital accumulation: property rights, stable currency and suppression of revolts at home; a strong navy and expansionist military-imperial policy abroad. Roiled by financial crashes, wars and slumps, *laissez faire* gave way to a greater role for state intervention under the mid-century Keynesian regime. From the 1980s, this was in turn supplanted by the neoliberal financialized regime, with state policy increasingly at the mercy of the market. The present era is increasingly one of ‘governance without government’; transnational regulations pre-empt social reform and impose

²³ CC, 87–89, 105, 77, 85, 110, 77.

²⁴ CC, pp. 116, 119, 121–2. Ellen Meiksins Wood’s classic statement is ‘The Separation of the Economic and the Political in Capitalism’, NLR 127, May–June 1981.

finance capital's agenda—most dramatically in the rule of the Troika (IMF, ECB, EC) over Greece in 2015.²⁵

This 'democratic deficit', Fraser argues, is the historically specific form that capitalism's inherent political contradiction assumes under the current regime of accumulation, which has so diminished democratic power that it cannot solve the urgent problems it confronts: the climate crisis, economic insecurity, the breakdown of social care. It thus becomes an integral part of the general crisis—and cannot be resolved without transforming the societal order, root and branch. This political dysfunction found a subjective correlate in 2016, as tens of millions of voters defected from 'politics as usual'. Victories for Brexit and Trump were rebukes to the architects of neoliberalism, Fraser writes. The fortunes of the populists have waxed and waned, often due to their disappointing spells in office, but 2016 signalled a shift in the political winds: the scope for public intervention broadened, the veil of neoliberal common sense was torn, the boundary between the political and the economic began to shift; yet capital still retains its grip on the levers of power. Politically, we face uncertain terrain, with no broadly legitimate hegemonic bloc, nor any credible counter-hegemonic challenger. The system's impasses will continue to mount until one can be assembled.²⁶

Sketching a possible response to the crisis, Fraser thinks not in terms of a new regime of capital accumulation, but a new conception of socialism. If such a possibility seems far off, *Cannibal Capitalism* insists that it is still worth discussing the real emergent possibilities—'the potentials for human freedom, well-being and happiness'—that capitalism has brought within reach but cannot actualize. Such a conception would need to re-think the socialized economy's relation to its background conditions, 'to reimagine their interrelations', reversing the current priorities: not growth for the sake of private accumulation but the

²⁵ CC, pp. 124–30.

²⁶ CC, pp. 130–33. Earlier versions published first as 'Legitimation Crisis? On the Political Contradictions of Financialized Capitalism', *Critical Historical Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2015 and in *Was stimmt nicht mit der Demokratie? Eine Debatte mit Klaus Dörre, Nancy Fraser, Stephan Lessenich und Hartmut Rosa*, ed. Hanna Ketterer and Karina Becker, Berlin 2019. See also Nancy Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born: From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond*, London and New York 2019. A version of the main essay was originally published as 'From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond', *American Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 4, Winter 2017.

nurturing of people, safe-guarding of nature and democratic self-rule. It would make the growth question a political one, offering a rule of thumb for markets under socialism: no markets ‘at the bottom’—basic needs (food, shelter, clothing, healthcare, clean water, etc) would be subject to democratic discussion, but provided as a right—and no markets ‘at the top’, for the surplus would be seen as the collective wealth of society as a whole, and allocated by a collective planning process. In between, there could be space for experimentation, a mix of possibilities: commons, co-operatives, self-organizing associations—rendering the boundaries between background conditions more porous and more responsive.²⁷

Questions

The richness and originality of Fraser’s construction speaks for itself. It’s hard to think of a single contemporary writer who has attempted a conceptual synthesis on this scale and of this complexity—a model resolutely radical in intent. Attempts to enlarge our understanding of capitalism have generally examined it in relation to one extra domain at a time. There is a rich literature on imperialism, slavery and racialization, examining the American experience in particular—and an impressive body of work on social reproduction.²⁸ Eco-Marxists such as James O’Connor, John Bellamy Foster, Mike Davis, Andreas Malm and Jason Moore have produced powerful analyses historicizing the relation of capitalism to the environment. Many thinkers have tried to probe the connections between economic and political malaise in recent years, among them Peter Mair, Colin Crouch, Wendy Brown and John Judis, with Wolfgang Streeck’s *Buying Time* a standout explanation.²⁹ But Fraser’s is surely the first attempt to date to map all these dimensions as an interrelated and determinate whole—and not just for the neoliberal era or the advanced-capitalist North, but on a world scale and across a span of centuries.

²⁷ CC, pp. 151–57.

²⁸ On imperialism, racialization and slavery, the tradition descends from DuBois, Oliver Cromwell Cox and Eric Williams to Orlando Patterson, Robin Blackburn, Manning Marable, Barbara Fields, Cedric Johnson, Barbara Ransby and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, among others. On social reproduction, the line descending from—and complicating—Engels would include Maria Mies, Lisa Vogel, Wally Secombe, Johanna Brenner, Jacqueline Jones, Tithi Bhattacharya, Gabriel Winant and Arlie Hochschild.

²⁹ Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, London and New York 2014.

Designedly schematic, Fraser's model provides a valuable heuristic for empirical testing and conceptual investigation. Thematically, the connections with her earlier thinking will be apparent. As in 'From Redistribution to Recognition?', she argues for a transformative politics, tackling deep structures, against the affirmative ameliorations of neoliberal progressivism; the 21st century has vindicated her insistence on capitalist inequity, so out of fashion in the 1990s. Methodologically, too, there are many continuities—above all, in the patterning of social relations by boldly abstract categories, augmented by occasional deep dives into empirical exemplum, usually cultural in form (it is very rare to find facts and figures in her writing, which operates in the realm of social theory, not social science). Fraser's writing has always prized clarity and accessibility, but the style here is avowedly more popular (sometimes at a cost: chapter titles punning on the 'cannibal' metaphor). Conceptually, a selection of Marxian categories have come to the fore—production and reproduction, expropriation and exploitation, core and periphery—and Rawlsian 'justice' is now more of a social metric than an endpoint. The categories here are also distinctively spatial, in a manner reminiscent of Habermas—foreground and backgrounds, shifts in perspective, a 'topography' of capitalist society—but also discursive, in more deconstructionist spirit: a front story and back story, each abode governed by a unique ontological 'grammar'.

It is not always easy to know how to fill in or re-people these abstract categories with living realities—to assess their accuracy as conceptual tools, or judge their usefulness as guides to action, in the light of other knowledge. In interviews, Fraser has clarified that she sees the root of the general crisis in the drive for profits of a small group of powerful actors—Wall Street, Big Oil, Big Pharma, Silicon Valley; Walmart, GE, Cargill and the like—ravaging the 'non-economic' realms.³⁰ An empirical road-test might ask how far her model serves to illuminate contemporary struggles. If we take, for example, the conflict over resource extraction in Ecuador, Fraser's heuristic would compel us to take into account not only the operations of the giant Northern mining companies and the habitats of the local communities, but also the politics of the Quito government, the strength of the Ecuadorian fiscal state and the social-reproductive implications for both the indigenous groups involved and the wider population, in the context of a broader conjunctural crisis.

³⁰ See for example, Rhoda Feng, 'Nancy Fraser's Lessons from the Long History of Capitalism', *The Nation*, 29 November 2022.

Or take the overlapping domains revealed by the long struggle of the Gilets Jaunes against Macron's petrol tax: a 'progressive neoliberal' environmental measure rejected on economic and social-reproductive (*fin du mois*) grounds by struggling formal-sector workers, their protests brutally suppressed by the state, in an EU that is sucking democratic decision-making into an unaccountable void.

The notion of boundary struggles helps to open up a wider understanding of recent battles in the US. Abortion rights, for example, pit women's reproductive autonomy against political and juridical opponents—not just the conservative Supreme Court but the Democratic congressional majorities that have refused to legislate for women's control over their own bodies. Or take Black Lives Matter: through Fraser's heuristic, not only a resistance movement against racialized state violence, but an expression of the harm caused by material inequality in an America struggling at once to re-gear and to decarbonize its financialized, de-industrialized economy against overseas rivals.

On a preliminary test, then, Fraser's construction seems genuinely useful. Does it also serve as a dynamic explanatory model for capitalist society, proposing laws of motion and theories of causality as, say, the concept of the mode of production aspired to do? This raises a conceptual question: the nature of the 'background zones', and their relations to the economic 'foreground' and to each other. It is an issue explored at length in Fraser's illuminating dialogue with Rahel Jaeggi, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory*, which forms an intriguing critical-theoretical pendant to *Cannibal Capitalism*. Here, Jaeggi poses a series of probing questions. Are the background zones 'inside' the capitalist system, *à la* Lukács, or outside it, *à la* Polanyi? What are the relations between foreground and backgrounds—determinism, functional necessity, dependencies in several directions? What changes the dynamics within each field and the equilibria between them? Fraser explains that she sees the backgrounds on which the capitalist economy depends as non- or, perhaps, semi-commodified, by analogy with Wallerstein's concept of semi-proletarianized households, which derive a good part of their subsistence from non-wage sources, including state transfers, informal reciprocity and self-provisioning. There is an objective structural argument here, she argues, invoked by Hegel in the *Philosophy of Right*—where the sphere of contractual relations is possible only on the basis of background non-contractual social relations—as well as by

Polanyi in *The Great Transformation*, where markets depend for their existence on non-marketized society.

Yet isn't Fraser's division between 'capitalist economy' and 'non-economic zones' haunted by the ghost of Habermas's 'economic system' versus pristine 'lifeworld'? Jaeggi presses her on this question. Is Fraser repeating the same move that she once criticized in Habermas, seeing the economy preying on these 'innocent' domains?³¹ Fraser denies this. She doesn't see the economy 'colonizing' these zones, in Habermas's terms, but rather a process of contestation, as capital attempts to 'devour' them. The resulting configuration is the outcome of struggle, based on the balance of social forces. While non-commodified and outside the *economy*, the zones are inside capitalist society as a whole. To see social reproduction or nature as 'outside' capitalist society and inherently opposed to it would be a romantic view, she argues—imagining that they could be sites for counter-hegemony, when they are in fact symbiotic with capital. At the same time, they are sites of internal contradiction for capitalism, generating their own non-economic values—for social reproduction, ideals of love and solidarity; for nature, ecological values of planetary stewardship; for politics, principles of democracy and self-determination. Fraser's both-and form of argumentation—so illuminating when applied to the problem of mediating between economic and cultural claims for justice—begins to confound when deployed to insist on the irrevocable entanglement of the economic and its non-economic others.

In any case, is it not worse to be 'devoured' than to be colonized? This raises the further question of how seriously Fraser's 'cannibal' metaphor should be taken. Her initial note on this is playful, suggesting that the term's different meanings offer various avenues for analysis.³² Its origin lies in a corruption of the Spanish term for the natives of the Caribbean, alleged by the conquistadors to be eaters of human flesh. As a verb, it may also refer to dismemberment—dismantling the component parts of a machine in order to put them to use them for something else; in biology, analogously, autophagy is the recycling of parts of cells. In astronomy, 'cannibalization' indicates a body that exerts a gravitational pull on another, incorporating its mass. And finally, there is the ouroboros, the mythical serpent or dragon that eats its own tail—an Ancient Egyptian symbol of eternal renewal, through the cycle of life, death and rebirth. In

³¹ C:ACCT, p. 51.

³² CC, pp. xiii–xiv.

Cannibal Capitalism, it is not always clear which meaning we should have in mind. Is capitalism an ouroboros—the Lukácsian, internalist view—devouring its own body? Or is it a cannibal—the Polanyian, externalist one—consuming its like (the extra-economic) but not its very self?

The distinction may seem pedantic, but followed to its logical conclusion it has ramifications for Fraser's assessment of capitalism's tendency towards crisis and its capacity to survive. Put bluntly: a cannibal, if voracious enough, may one day run out of food; the symbolic serpent will not. Certainly, an account like Fraser's or Wallerstein's that locates capitalism's origins in sixteenth-century Spain is more likely to depict it as a form subject to continual self-renewal than one that begins with the growth of industrial capitalism in Britain in the early 1800s or its generalization across the advanced powers in the 1870s, with a third of the world under avowedly communist regimes for a good part of the twentieth century. The analysis of the changing regimes of accumulation from the 1500s onwards, at once Schumpeterian in its focus on the creative destruction powering the system and Kuhnian in its use of paradigm shifts, reveals an underlying functionalist logic: capitalism is because capitalism does. A new structure—for example, the two-wage household—emerges as the old one enters crisis and acts to restore homeostasis to the system; an explanatory model which, as Arthur Stinchcombe demonstrated in *Constructing Social Theories*, tends to see a conservative tendency in the existing social order.³³ The desire to counter this may lead to an added emphasis on self-inflicted catastrophe as a way to break the chain.

The cannibal metaphor is perhaps best read as a rhetorical device, a flash of hyperbole for consciousness-raising purposes. Fraser's non-metaphorical formulation—that capital's drive for endless accumulation threatens to 'destabilize' or 'imperil' its conditions of possibility—is more compelling. Yet this raises the question of the commensurability of the 'background zones'. Destabilization seems an entirely plausible fate—or actuality—for the environment. Concretizing analysis might identify geophysical limits to capitalist growth in the form of climate destabilization, resource exhaustion or a social-system collapse outpacing green capital's ability to achieve any real impact.³⁴ Fraser hints

³³ Arthur Stinchcombe, *Constructing Social Theories*, Cambridge, MA 1960, pp. 80–101.

³⁴ See Thomas Meaney, 'Fortunes of the Green New Deal', NLR 138, Nov–Dec 2022.

at such a conclusion, giving her programme the provisional title of 'ecosocialism', but holds back from elevating the ecological to the role of primary political concern. It remains an equal among other abodes. Yet it is hard to see the crisis of care posing quite the same existential threat as global warming. This is not to deny the tragic social fallout that has followed the twentieth-century's historic working-class defeats, of which Middle America's opioid epidemic and deaths of despair are emblematic. Not only for feminist reasons but morally, too, Fraser has good reason to foreground the strains placed on social reproduction. But with China's entry into the world market, global capital has benefited from a glut of cheap labour; young workers from Central America and elsewhere are banging on America's doors. In an instrumental sense, capital has no need to fret about labour's perpetuation.

The position of the political as a background zone is based on Meiksins Wood's theorization of its separation from the economic—but this can be misleading. It is true that economic compulsion in a cash economy supplies the whip for labour. But within the ruling bloc, wealth and power are joined by a dense connective tissue of professional, social, institutional, educational and familial bonds. Here the historical view might have an advantage over philosophical analysis, pointing to the role of the ruling class. Fraser puts this nicely when she speaks of the hollow Wizard of Oz quality of today's politicians, who strut and preen before a curtain that conceals the real powers. Her judgements on Trump, Biden and the rest are admirably sober.³⁵ Yet it would be useful to have a fuller sense of political power—the vast institutional complex of the state, its immense powers of coercion and surveillance, its tireless machinery of ideological self-justification—to complement the analysis of the multinationals and the banks.

Politics in *Cannibal Capitalism* is mainly treated in terms of democracy, or as non-agonistic public authority. But public authority is only non-agonistic when it is entirely sure of its command. Fraser argues persuasively that the solution to a crisis in one background realm must simultaneously address those in the others; a total critique yields a total programme of action. But where to start? Calls to change everything, to listen to everyone, to acknowledge that everything is capitalism, can be alternately inspiring or demotivating. New kinds of transitional strategy will need to be elaborated to get us from here to there and they will

³⁵ CC, pp. 135–36.

require an understanding of state power to inform them, as also of elite dissensus.³⁶ Fraser is surely right to stress that connections must be made across the boundaries; but decisions about action require a principle of priority, a model of politically targeted alliances.

None of this is to detract from the immense achievement of Fraser's synthesis. Her lucid re-politicization of critical theory constitutes a real advance for radical thought. For her, the work of social philosophy involves conceiving the living links between *Kapitalkritik* and anti-capitalist action. For decades, Fraser has defied intellectual trends in defence of a truly socialist feminism, often provoking scrutiny and critique, as we have seen, from theorist colleagues. Poststructuralist linguistic feminism was at its high-tide when she first asserted the importance of an emancipatory political philosophy that paid attention to redistribution—and to the material impacts of Clinton-era social policy on the marginalized—as well as to recognition. Later, at the peak of neoliberal feminism, she sought to defend the project of the second wave from its 'uncanny double', represented in the corporate-friendly forms of diversity and inclusion for a privileged minority of women, at the expense of the rest. Instead of focusing solely on the single issue of gendered experience, she has pursued a research agenda so wide, ambitious and rigorous as to arrive at a unique description of the entire capitalist system, historic and contemporary. Current left intellectual life owes an incalculable debt to her for keeping such questions alive during periods in which they were overlooked or dismissed in political and academic life alike—as well as for revivifying the debate at a time when the critical mapping of capitalism's complexities is a task as urgent as it is daunting.

³⁶ Richard Lachmann, *First Class Passengers on a Sinking Ship: Elite Politics and the Decline of Great Powers*, London and New York 2020. Lachmann's research reveals a bricolage of compromises and fixes, under constant repair, to balance competing interests.