

EMANCIPATION AND SOCIAL STRUGGLES AGAINST CANNIBAL CAPITALISM

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ABSTRACT

Nancy Fraser's book, *Cannibal Capitalism*, can be added to the long list of remarkable works in the style of the *Zeitdiagnose*. From this perspective, the article focuses on the concept of capitalism as an institutionalized social system. Three points are examined. The interpretation of capitalism as a consumer of care introduces the categories of bio-capitalism and intimate labor. The analysis of the crisis of contemporary democracies by questioning the category of politicism, which Fraser argues overlooks the causal power of extra-political society. Finally, by exploring the category of emancipation as one of the relevant themes in the political discourse on the transformation of society.

KEYWORDS

Bio-Capitalism, Feminism, Care, Democracy, Emancipation

Nancy Fraser's book, *Cannibal Capitalism*, offers many theoretical insights for a diagnosis of our times and can be placed in the long line of remarkable works in the style of a diagnosis of the times¹. The concept of capitalism as an institutionalised social system has the merit of providing a perspective for understanding the trends, crises and contradictions of contemporary societies. The idea of cannibalism as something that engulfs any differentiation of spheres is fascinating, as the sequence of chapters in the book shows very well. An example of this can be seen in academia, where capitalism is affecting the scientific activity of public universities, which are now governed by market rules that strongly guide scientific production, the ability to raise funds, and the maniac attention to international rankings as the only measure of scientific quality. These logics, which were previously completely alien to research and universities, now strongly determine research agendas. The

¹ As suggested by Michel Foucault, an important example of this kind of book is the Immanuel Kant's essay on Enlightenment (*Beantwortung der Frage. Was ist Aufklärung?*). Cfr. *M. Foucault, Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?* in: *Dits et Ecrits 1954-1988*, Gallimard, Paris, 1994.

rule of competition has become a pervasive principle of governance in all spheres of life, including universities and, more generally, culture. As Colin Crouch points out in his book, this kind of pervasiveness of market logic produces what he calls post-democracy, which occurs when the logic of the market invades a terrain previously governed by other rules².

In relation to this complex framework, so analytically presented in the Fraser book, my contribution will focus on three points. The first relates to chapter four of the book, which looks at capitalism as a care guzzler. For Nancy Fraser, this aspect is the main site of its crisis. The activities and energies required to care for families, maintain households, sustain communities, nurture friendships, build political networks and forge solidarities are indispensable to society: they replenish human beings on a daily and generational basis, while maintaining social bonds. In capitalist societies, they also ensure the supply of commodified labour from which capital extracts surplus value. Without this work of social reproduction there could be no production or profit or capital; no economy or culture or state. Fraser interprets the current 'care crunch' as an acute expression of a social-reproductive contradiction inherent in capitalism. This formulation suggests two ideas. Firstly, the current pressures on care are not accidental, but have deep structural roots in the current social order. Secondly, the current crisis of social reproduction points to something that is embedded not only in the current form of the system, but in capitalist society *per se*. Therefore, it is not only neoliberalism, as the last version of financial capitalism, but the very logic of capitalism that needs to be transformed.

Feminist theories have underlined how caring activities are fundamental to the reproduction of social bonds, to the maintenance of society, while at the same time stressing that this kind of activity has historically been misrecognised, denied and made invisible in the political, moral and economic spheres, even before capitalism³. We know that the exclusion of caring activities is determined by the way in which the boundaries of political, economic, social and moral space are conceived, defining a specific social ontology as a consequence of the demarcation of these spaces, a social ontology that includes the specific identities of women and men. The representation of the subject of politics, economics and morality as rational, autonomous, free, independent and fully cooperative, a specific version of individualism that characterises modern and contemporary political discourses from Hobbes to Rawls, is based on the relegation of care, bodies, needs, but also emotions and feelings, beyond the public space, into a dimension of naturalised and pre-political private dimension. This situation is also reinforced by the contribution of political and social institutions, laws and social expectations, which have ensured

² C. Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, John Wiley and Sons, New York, 2004.

³ Among others, see: V. Held, *Feminist Morality. Transforming Culture, Society and Politics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993; S. Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family*, Basic Books, New York, 1989.

that men who are active in the public sphere can count on women's care work without questioning this arrangement, which has been taken for granted over time as a privilege that is part of the 'natural order'. The strength of this demarcation also has a cognitive dimension, and it is so deep-rooted that it has generated beliefs and habitus, as Pierre Bourdieu pointed out in his book *La Domination Masculine*⁴. These habitus are often introjected through symbolic and even epistemic violence, so that it is really important to ask ourselves to what extent it is possible to overcome them, even in a non-capitalist society⁵. In other words, if the misrecognition of care, in some cases stigmatisation, has a transhistorical dimension and is not only internal to capitalist society, it is not obvious to think that it can disappear with capitalism itself, notwithstanding the specific declination of reproductive activity internal to capitalism in the broader sense that Fraser proposes. Furthermore, we must also ask to what extent socialism will be able to transform the transhistorical undervaluation and segregation of care, which began in ancient Greece and continued through modernity to contemporary societies. I think that this critical point should be explored in order to understand how deeply rooted the misrecognition of care activities is in our societies, both in cultural and symbolic terms.

Another point relates to a specific feature of contemporary capitalism that is very consistent with the perspective of cannibal capitalism. The literature that explores this element brings into play the categories of biocapitalism and intimate labour, which occurs when capitalism puts the life to work. I'm referring here to care work that has become a commodity, and to all the analyses of the commodification of life that invest the body and forms of intimacy, intimate and affective life. Starting from a broad definition of care work, the reflection on intimate labour is very innovative in many ways⁶. From this perspective, intimate work is a set of activities that can be defined in terms of productive labour because it involves the exchange of money, is situated in the labour market, formal or informal, and is subject to market forces. Domestic health assistants, hotel housekeepers, hostesses, escorts, manicurists and masseurs are examples of a wide range of workers involved in this type of work. The intimate work activities promote the physical, intellectual, affective and other emotional needs of strangers, friends, family members, sexual partners, children and the elderly, sick or disabled. But this type of work includes also a wider range of other forms of paid and unpaid work that do not normally fall under the category of 'work', such as sperm donation to *in vitro* fertilisation clinics, care for transgender people and the adoption of foreign children. The wide variety of activities that can

⁴ P. Bourdieu, *La Domination Masculine*, Seuil, Paris, 1998.

⁵ I explored this point in: A. Loretoni, *Ampliare lo sguardo. Genere e teoria politica*, Donzelli, 2014.

⁶ Eileen Boris e Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (Eds.), *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2010.

be classified as intimate work shows the blurred boundaries between home and work, productive and non-productive work, care and economy, public and private. Intimacy and work should not be seen as having almost nothing in common, mainly because intimacy belongs to the private sphere and work to the public sphere. On the contrary, according to this perspective, intimacy and labour intersect in many ways, precisely thanks to the cannibalistic capitalist logic that tends to include every domain, by exaggerating this connection. While historically there has always been a close relationship between labour and intimacy, as evidenced by the existence of the centuries-old professions of prostitution and domestic labour, contemporary societies, and especially those affected by global capitalism, are characterised by an intensification of the commodification and proliferation of intimate labour. Caring is everywhere and there is something that we can define as a global economy of intimacy, often gendered and racialised. It is important to emphasise that the proliferation of intimate work leads in many ways to new forms of social inequality. According to the theorists of affective, emotional and intimate labour, the tendency of contemporary capitalism to transform bodies and life itself, its most intimate dimensions, into commodities and objects of consumption, generates new injustices and contradictions on a global scale. This aspect is of enormous social and economic importance and reinforces the idea of the cannibalism that capitalism practises, leaving no dimension outside the logic of accumulation and profit.

My second point relates to the analysis of the crisis of contemporary democracies⁷. The various analyses of this kind of crisis, from Colin Crouch to Andreas Kalivas to Sheila Benhabib, fall into the error that Fraser defines as politicism. By analogy with economism, politicism overlooks the causal power of extra-political society. By treating the political order as self-determining, it fails to problematise the larger social matrix that produces its deformations. It would certainly be impossible to explain the current crisis of democracy without also referring to the economic factors that have had such a strong impact on the growth of inequalities since 2008. At the same time, I think it is necessary to address the specificity of the regressive turn in many European countries, such as Poland, Hungary and Italy, as well as the United States and other countries in the world. This crisis, which has led to the definition of illiberal democracy, appears to be very different from the previous democratic deficit⁸. In this context, we are witnessing the unprecedented restriction of political rights and the autonomy of the judiciary. Furthermore, a specific feature of this policy is the attack on sexual and reproductive rights. The reintroduction of a traditional concept of family is also being finalised in order to delegitimise homosexuality and the LGBTQI+ community through

⁷ See chapter 5 of the Fraser's book *Cannibal Capitalism*: "Butchering Democracy. Why Political Crisis is Capital's Read Meat".

⁸ The definition of 'illiberal democracy' has been proposed by F. Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom. Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2003.

specific legislation. More recently, within the alt-right politics, the reintroduction of a traditional notion of the family has included the mantra of ethnic substitution and nativism as a declination of conspiracy, with a clear anti-migration intent. Even the No Vax campaign, which has taken up the idea of "My Body, My Choice" by incorporating a deformed version of individual and geopolitical sovereignty based on mistrust of epistemic communities, represents a specific feature of our time that severely limits the quality of our democracies. The possibility of reading all these tendencies through the contradiction between the imperatives of capital accumulation and the maintenance of public powers seems questionable. In order to understand the crisis of contemporary democracies, some scholars have proposed the category of regression⁹. In this case, regression doesn't mean a step backwards in history, but rather a combination of different elements of history coming from the present and the past, in the same sense that Ernst Bloch, in his philosophical analysis of temporality, states the idea of the coexistence of different historical times¹⁰. The regressive phenomena therefore represent new and unprecedented situations and not the trivial hypothesis that history repeats itself. The cultural backlash hypothesis suggests that the success of many authoritarian populist parties, even in rich countries less affected by inequalities, is based on a kind of silent revolution in values that has triggered a backlash that offers support to populist leaders¹¹. Moral conservatism combined with hostility to the threat of 'outsiders' as racial or ethnic minorities, Islamophobia, misogyny, homophobia and anti-Semitism on the one hand, and the construction of political identities around faith, family and nation on the other, provide support for authoritarian and populist politics. At the same time, contemporary alt-right politics demonstrates an ability to abandon the overtly anti-democratic as an important part of its success. The reason for right-wing extremism, or the potential for such right-wing extremism, is that the social conditions for fascism persist, and despite the collapse of fascism itself, the conditions for fascist movements are still present socially, if not politically¹². Not only is it wrong to consider the process of civilisation 'secure', but the survival of nazism and fascism within democracy is paradoxically more dangerous than the survival of fascist tendencies against democracy. On the basis of these analyses, it seems that the deep crisis of democracy is partly independent from capitalism, and therefore the reasons for its precarious state are to be found in anthropological dimensions and social dynamics that disregard structural economic aspects.

⁹ H. Eiselberger (Ed.), *The Great Regression*, Polity Press, Cambridge (UK), 2017.

¹⁰ E. Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, Polity Press, Cambridge (UK), 1991.

¹¹ P. Norris and D. Ingelhardt, *Cultural Backlash. Trump, Brexit and the Authoritarian Populism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK), 2019.

¹² On this point see Th. Adorno, *Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism*, Polity Press, Cambridge (UK), 2020.

The last point I would like to explore is related to the category of emancipation, analyzed in different chapters of the Fraser book. In the political discourse on transformation of society emancipation is a permanent relevant theme. As occurred for many other concepts of Modernity, we are asked to reshape the meaning of emancipation, starting from a critical point of view and by defining some new features of this category. Associated to the first wave of feminism, emancipation has been negatively interpreted as homologation. The same women emancipatory movements at that time have been described as mimetic in relation to the male construction of identity, citizenship and political participation. They tended to reproduce the same system for women, by simply including them in a social, political and juridical structure shaped by men and for men. If the task today is to strip emancipation from these elements, the critical approach should include also the removal of the self-celebrating framework relative to the modern concept of progress derived from the Eurocentric perspective of history, also by avoiding the colonial and orientalist traces embedded in it. Redefined in these critical terms, emancipation can represent a category able to encompass a multiple range of social struggles for freedom, by helping us to make a critical diagnosis of the contemporary conflicts, interpreted with regards to their specificity, contingency and unpredictability. As the ‘conceptual reverse’ of domination and subordination, emancipation indicates a process of liberation from domination and oppression. Along this perspective, some feminist analyzes on the oppressive women condition allow to better comprehend the differences of the political claims and contexts. The multiple and intersecting faces of oppression, as firstly indicated by Iris Marion Young¹³, and the intersectionality framework later proposed by Kimberle Crenshaw, emphasize the overlapping volume of the discrimination axis, by reinforcing the diversity not only related to masculinity, as it occurs in traditional gender studies, but *within* the gender and *among* women. To represent the equal condition of oppression and discrimination among all the women only because they are women is undoubtedly questionable and it should be clear that women live in diversified conditions due to their social position, nationality and/or ethnicity, their class and sexual orientation. The *intersectionality* perspective proposes a promising reflection to these questions controversially asked to *mainstream* Western feminism since it is accused to disown the intra-gender differentiation¹⁴. The first victim of this new setting is the idea of sisterhood in its universal and global concept. Since the ‘70s US feminist theory has been redefined as a consequence of methodological and philosophical reflections on power and social change. By focusing on issues

¹³ See the five, intersecting faces of oppression proposed by I. M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 1990; K. Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality*, The New Press, New York, 2017.

¹⁴ C. Arruzza, T. Batthacharya, N. Fraser, *Feminism for 99%. A Manifesto*, Verso Books, New York, 2019.

such as subjectivity and identity through critical race and Third World studies, some feminist perspectives have promoted a de-essentialisation of the identity process. Furthermore, *identity politics* has been accused of equating different concepts of oppression, thus removing the analysis of the debate on the forms of structural supremacy. Locating the theme of difference within intercultural feminist studies supported Chandra T. Mohanty's approach to analysing political *agency* in its historical and contextual form, offering a viable alternative to the hypothesis of universal gender oppression. According to her approach, the idea of universal gender oppression is problematic because it relies on the invisibility of race and class categories. Strategically, it is undoubtedly possible to maintain the debate on women's universal rights as a normative horizon, but at the same time the universality of gender oppression needs to be deconstructed on behalf of a more precise and transformative feminist politics. To be a feminist is not naturally related to be a woman, and living the experience of being a woman does not turn us into feminists by osmosis. In other words, to be feminist is to consciously choose the dimension of political contestation. The universal sisterhood and the possibility to construct a common space for political contestation cannot be defined by the fact that women are a homogeneous group, regardless of the cultural context, a group defined by the same experiences and therefore by the same interests and objectives. Deepening and deconstructing this condition of apparent homogeneity, it proves that the representation of women's experience is actually the Western women's self-representation, the same one that says "*sisterhood is global*". In this hypothesis, solidarity among women on a global scale is only possible by removing history as a model, which aims at an *a priori* assumption of this commonality and overshadows the social and cultural environment, assuming a common condition for each woman. Mohanty makes a significant critique of a part of Western feminist narratives that reproduce some colonial traces¹⁵. Through discourse deconstruction, her analyses challenge white feminists to focus on internal contradictions and aporias. Drawing on Afro-American feminism, the Western universalist perspective is deconstructed by re-mapping the historical and political experiences of the women of developing countries. This proposal leads to a hitherto unknown challenge to feminist historiography and epistemology, supported by race-critical theory, postcolonial studies and critical approaches to neoliberal globalisation. In this scenario, the isolated concept of gender is challenged. When analysing the subjectivity of black and Afro-American women, racial discrimination cannot be avoided, because their subjectivity is more complex than simply belonging to a gender. In addition, intersectionality tends to focus on what injustice is and what it means, rather than discussing transcendent principles of justice divorced from any concrete context. In the Rawlsian and more general contractual paradigms, the

¹⁵ C. Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders. Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2003.

perception of injustice is ultimately irrelevant. Once the transcendental characteristics of justice are defined, the only level of analysis is to measure the gap between theory and practice, principles and their realisation. In the different framework I'm proposing, the analyses of injustice, discrimination and inequality could produce new ideals and values, new interpretations of justice. The perspective of 'immanent critique' can be helpful in better understanding this methodological approach¹⁶. In fact, it does not work internally on the lack of conformity of reality to the ideal dimension of the society being analysed, but it transcends the normativity of the same society in a work of critique which transforms the society and at the same time its related normative and ideal dimension. The failure to realise an ideal model of justice does not preserve the same ideal, but modifies it along a performative path that refers not to an abstract and predetermined model, but to the concrete experiences of injustice. There is no *a priori* in the critique, but there is a critique that is critically and realistically contextualised, that could transcend the context towards a mild normative transformation that could reduce its discriminatory and oppressive features. Linked to this approach, emancipation is not a concept related to a precise trajectory within a theological framework, but rather a concept open to different practices, forms of intersectional agency, and social and political claims connected to different contexts and not shaped on the basis of a unique idea of modernisation. In the latter sense, there is a task for feminist politics as well for feminist scholars to enter into an intense dialogue with Black and Global South feminism. If democracy is incompatible with structural domination, as Fraser rightly suggests, then the category of emancipation, revisited and reshaped, should be at the centre of our thinking about transforming society at national and global level.

¹⁶ R. Jaeggi, R. Celikates, *Filosofia sociale. Una introduzione*, Le Monnier, Firenze, 2018.