

**ANALYSIS OF NANCY FRASER'S CRITICISM OF THIRD WAVE FEMINISM**

Sara Abdel Malak

CVSP 230

Dr. Nadia Abou Ali

I will be presenting and discussing Nancy Fraser's critique of third wave feminism in "Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History" which was published in the *New Left Review* in 2009. She describes how second-wave feminist demands were transformed and coopted as capitalism turned from state-organized to neoliberal. I will be presenting her analysis on how four defining characteristics of the political culture of state-organized capitalism (economism, androcentrism, étatism, and Westphalianism) provoked the multi-dimensional critique of second-wave feminists of the 1960's and 1970's and how those same demands were used to legitimate neoliberal capitalism. I will also present the suggestions that Fraser gives on how to restore the rightful demands of second-wave feminism- which is multi-dimensional in its incorporation of economic, cultural, and political aspects in its critique of injustice. Throughout this paper and as I present Fraser's arguments, I will interpret her work by providing cases of global movements and researches as real-life examples because I believe that there was a lack of empirical evidence in her article.

Fraser first tackles economism, which is the practice of assigning primary importance to the economy/economic achievement and ignoring other factors (such as culture), as a major part of the political culture of state-organized capitalism. Although this term is usually used in Marxist discourse to criticize ultra-leftist regimes who only expect their working class citizens to concern themselves with economic struggles rather than political struggle and participation, Fraser uses economism to describe the OECD welfare states (which consisted of democratic countries that support free market economies) and the ex-colonial developmental states of the postwar period. The radical second-wave feminist movement, which was part of the New Left

and anti-imperialist counter-movements, rejected this exclusive focus on maldistribution and class struggle as the only areas of injustice. “The private is political” was used as a rallying slogan of feminist and student movements from the late 1960s to emphasise that women's personal issues (e.g sex, family and cultural traditions) are also political issues that need political intervention to generate change. For example, the 1968 movement in Italy- which was inspired by distaste for traditional Italian society and international protests- was one of the driving cultural forces that led to the introduction of the first Italian abortion law in following years<sup>1</sup>. In addition, second-wave feminists introduced sidelined identities into the justice discourse, showing the many different axes of injustices that occur and intersect. For example, the presence of the Black feminist movement evolved with the second wave of the American women’s movement in the late 1960s, making the 1970s a defining decade for contemporary Black feminism<sup>2</sup>. However, Fraser shows how the shift from “redistribution to recognition”, a benchmark of neoliberalism, transformed second-wave feminism into a variant of “identity politics”. In Fraser’s previous work titled “Heterosexism, Misrecognition and Capitalism: A Response to Judith Butler”, she describes the economic/cultural gap in modern capitalism – where economic and cultural harms can be separated and “personal” choices (such as which gender we have sex with) are not of concern to big corporations- as long as their profits are not

---

<sup>1</sup> Bracke, M. A. (2017) Feminism, the State, and the centrality of reproduction: abortion struggles in 1970s Italy. *Social History*, 42(4), pp. 524-546. (doi:10.1080/03071022.2017.1368234).

<sup>2</sup> Shroff, Sascha. “The Original Activists: Black Feminism and the Black Feminist Movement.” *NOW*, April 9, 2021.

affected by them<sup>3</sup>. This helps us understand why it is of neoliberalism's interest to have culture be the only aspect we criticize, rather than the political economy which can threaten its *raison d'être*- increasing surplus value. In her book "Justice Interruptus", she claims that "all real-world oppressed collectivities are 'bivalent'; have both an economic and a status component; virtually all, therefore, suffer both maldistribution and misrecognition in forms where neither of these injustices is a mere indirect effect of the other, but where each has some independent weight"<sup>4</sup>. So although Fraser believes that the economic and the cultural are decoupled in capitalist society, she insists that they be coupled in feminism's critique of capitalism. This critique should adopt "a fully three-dimensional account of injustice" integrating "the dimensions of redistribution, recognition and representation that splintered in the previous era". Fraser brings up the focus on violence and reproduction, rather than poverty, in international feminist campaigns as an example of the exclusive focus on culture in liberal feminism. Economic stress and the lack of supportive social services, both economic factors, are linked to increased cases of gender-based violence. However, this problem is usually only combatted through cultural awareness (workshops, awareness campaigns, etc.). According to Nancy Fraser, feminists should take a multidimensional approach when fighting against systems of injustice- not just look at them as results of economy or culture exclusively.

Fraser goes on to tackle Androcentrism, which is

---

<sup>3</sup> Fraser, Nancy. "Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism: A R *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 279-89. Accessed May 8, 2021. doi:10

<sup>4</sup> Fraser, Nancy. 1997. *Justice interruptus: critical reflections on the* New York: Routledge.



state-organized capitalism's construction of an ideal citizen; an ethnic-majority male worker who is a breadwinner and a family man. This idea is further solidified with the "family wage", which was a popular concept that consists a wage sufficient to support a family, including a dependent spouse and children. The family wage is a point where

maldistribution (through having higher rates of pay for male employees), misrecognition (through maintaining the traditional family structure that restricted women's independence and choice), and misrepresentation (through having male-dominated work force, welfare provision, politics, etc.) converge. Most importantly, it made women's labor of housework and social care invisible. Second-wave feminism recognized this and promoted women's full incorporation as wage-earners in capitalist society through introducing equal pay legislation, but also fought to recognize and valorize women's unwaged activities. In Sylvia Federici's 1975 book "Wages Against Housework", which is a model of the 1970's international feminist campaign demanding wages for housework, Federici claims that the unwaged condition of housework has excluded women from the social contract and exploited them and that demanding wages for housework is the only way to insert women into the socio-economic contract and truly oppose the gendered division of labor<sup>5</sup>. Although an economic demand at its root, it can only be accomplished once women realize their manipulation. Women are made to believe that this unpaid work, including housework and childcare, are essential feminine attributes and are expected to participate and even enjoy these activities. This cultural manipulation of the meaning of housework is the only way it manages to escape our definition of labor. Fraser states that neoliberalism resignified

---

<sup>5</sup> Federici, Silvia. 1975. *Wages against housework*. London: Power of Women Collective.

second-wave feminist's critique of the family wage by turning it into a romance for the new capitalist system with the two-earner family. This new system saw "depressed wage levels, decreased job security, declining living standards, a steep rise in the number of hours worked for wages per household" but that did not matter because women were pouring into the workforce. Far from coming a long way, women workers in the present neoliberal capitalist society suffer from the double and triple shifts that are caused by their dual reproductive and economic role: women who enter the labor force still have to carry out unpaid work of caring for the family and household chores which leads to many women working longer hours than men. In fact, a new study found that women who work more than 60 hours a week are at a higher risk of several chronic diseases and that the same increased risk is not seen in men because they do not have the extra burden of domestic work<sup>6</sup>. The feminist demand was twisted and used as a moral ground for "flexible, disorganized capitalism". Again, Fraser suggests that we break away from the extremes of the family wage and flexible capitalism and instead "valorize uncommodified activities, including carework" as "valued components of a good life for everyone".

Fraser then tackles *étatisme*, the state's authoritative control over citizens, which kills political participation and treats citizens as clients who receive services that have been decided by professionals in bureaucratic, top-down manner. Second-wave feminism rejected this managerial ethos and saw it as a reflection of the "modernized masculinity of the

---

<sup>6</sup> Dembe, A. E., & Yao, X. (2016). Chronic Disease Risks From Exposure to Long-Hour Work Schedules Over a 32-Year Period. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 58(9), 861-867.

professionalmanagerial stratum of state-organized capitalism”. Instead, they practiced anti-hierarchical, horizontal grassroots organizing in aim of enabling of citizens to be more participatory rather than to disable state institutions. Neoliberalism, which aims to reduce state action fully in order to privatize and deregulate the market, took advantage of this critique of the welfare state to mitigate the abolishment of social supports given by the state. In developing countries, a phenomenon that is all-too-familiar occurred, NGOization. Foreign-funded NGOs which provided shallow relief for structural problems took the place of the welfare state. According to Islah Jad, who wrote on the ‘NGOization’ of the Arab women’s movements, instead of strengthening political participation- which in turn strengthens state action and solves root causes of women’s struggles- “‘NGOization’ limits the struggle for national causes to ‘projects’ geared to priorities set by an international discourse without diversity, and fragments the accumulation of forces for social change”<sup>7</sup>. It sometimes even discredits the feminist agenda by associating it with western imperialist agendas. In fact, in the Arab world, the growing number of NGOs coincided with a weakening of the ideological political parties, and a growing retreat of states from service provision and social entitlements due to structural adjustment policies imposed on most Third World countries by the World Bank and the IMF<sup>8</sup>. Fraser mentions this point when she refers to the “explosion of microcredit” and

---

<sup>7</sup> Islah Jad, “The ‘NGOization’ of the Arab Women’s Movements,” *Al-Raida Journal*, January 1970, pp. 38-47, <https://doi.org/10.32380/alrj.v0i0.442>.

<sup>8</sup> Omvedt, G (1994) “Peasant, Dalits and Women: Democracy and India’s New Social Movements” In *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 24 (1):35-48.

“loan repayments” associated with ‘NGOization’ in developing countries. She urges feminism to strengthen public power through participatory democracies, instead.

Finally, Fraser writes about Westphalianism, which is the obligation of justice to apply only to the citizens of a nation state, as opposed to transnationalism. Fraser views this aspect of statesponsored capitalism to have been more ambivalent in its relationship with second-wave feminism and subsequently in neoliberalist feminism. Although second-wave feminists was sensitive to trans-border injustices in theory, feminists worked within their states to reach their demands in practice. Fraser believes that this could have been due to the lack of technology that would have made trans-national solidarity more readily achieved. With the globalization that accompanied neoliberalism and the availability of technology, the idea of a trans-national post-Westfalian feminist movement became a possibility. However, transnational feminism started looking more international when feminists joined the “global civil society” which included international peace organizations, such as the UN, that fit perfectly in the neoliberal global power structure. These international campaigns suffered from the same neoliberal approach previously described, which focused more on recognition than maldistribution and increased NGOization in the third world. Fraser believes that we should use our ability to address transnational injustices and we have already witnessed many examples of transnational solidarity in what is seen as the completely free and democratic space of the virtual world. This includes the current widespread support for the Palestinian struggle and the ability to show human rights abuses through filming and disseminating information. However, intergovernmental peace



organizations, who have failed many times to show proper effective responses to injustices around the world, are still legitimized.

In conclusion, I presented Nancy Fraser's critique of third-wave feminism by showing how the defining factors of state-sponsored capitalism- which triggered the second-wave feminist movement- have been used to justify neoliberal capitalism. I would like to make one last point and discuss how Fraser explains the "dangerous liaison" of feminism with neoliberalism. From the beginning of the text, Fraser had been suggesting that there might be a more rooted link between feminism and capitalism that did not occur simply because of capitalism's conniving ability to co-opt any counter movement. Is there a similarity between the two that makes it easy for feminism to be warped to benefit the capitalist agenda? Fraser sees that this point of convergence lies in feminism's critique of traditional authority. Neoliberal capitalism benefits off of critiquing traditional authority because it wants to eradicate any economic control done by authorities, such as the state, to have a complete freedom of market. Fraser finds it more important for us to focus on how feminism diverges from neoliberalism: the recognition that structural and systemic processes lead to women's subjugation, and those cannot be fought by a sole focus on "personal" responsibility and subjection. I believe that Fraser, through her work and use of language, shows us that a monolithic analysis of injustices tends to resemble the identity politics that it claims to be against. Only an approach that balances different axes/dimensions of injustices- whether it be those of recognition, maldistribution, or misrepresentation- is capable of truly dismantling systems of oppression.

## References

Bracke, M. A. (2017) Feminism, the State, and the centrality of reproduction: abortion struggles in 1970s Italy. *Social History*, 42(4), pp. 524-546. (doi:10.1080/03071022.2017.1368234).

Dembe, A. E., & Yao, X. (2016). Chronic Disease Risks From Exposure to Long-Hour Work Schedules Over a 32-Year Period. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 58(9), 861-867. (doi:10.1097/jom.0000000000000810)

Federici, Silvia. 1975. *Wages against housework*. London: Power of Women Collective.

Fraser, Nancy. "Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History: An Introduction." 2012.

Fraser, Nancy. "Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism: A Response to Judith Butler." *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 279-89. Accessed May 8, 2021. (doi:10.2307/466745).

Fraser, Nancy. 1997. *Justice interruptus: critical reflections on the "postsocialist" condition*. New York: Routledge.

Jad, Islah. "The 'NGOization' of the Arab Women's Movements." *Al-Raida Journal*, 1970, 38-47. <https://doi.org/10.32380/alrj.v0i0.442>.

Omvedt, G (1994) "Peasant, Dalits and Women: Democracy and India's New Social Movements" In *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 24 (1):35-48

Shroff, Sascha. "The Original Activists: Black Feminism and the Black Feminist Movement." *NOW*, April 9, 2021.