INTERVIEW

Democracy, Participation, and Capitalist Crisis

An Interview with Nancy Fraser

Nancy Fraser, Adrian Bua, and Nick Vlahos

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Abstract: This conversation with Nancy Fraser explores her work on the crises of capitalism, democracy, and participation. Fraser has argued that much scholarship in political science and democratic theory on these issues is hampered by "politicism"—an inclination to view the political in separation from other social spheres, which fails to appreciate the structural nature of contemporary crises. Fraser argues that the political arena is important because it is here that collective regulatory powers are exercised, however it needs to be situated within a broader understanding of the social totality to understand how it is affected by crisis dynamics in other spheres and how it might contribute to attenuating, or resolving, these. Our conversation begins by exploring these arguments in relation to Fraser's recent work on the critique of capitalism, and then traces how this relates to her work on the public sphere, participatory parity, and utopian thought.

Keywords: capitalism, crisis, critique, democracy, Nancy Fraser, participation

Adrian Bua: Professor Fraser, thanks very much for agreeing to take part in this interview.

We were inspired by your work with Rahel Jaeggi, where you provide a topography of the capitalist social order and build on that in in your more recent work in *Cannibal Capitalism* (2022a).

We are also very interested by your more recent project developing a post-intersectional critical theory by reconstructing the concept of labor through the categories of exploited, expropriated, and domesticated labor (Fraser 2022b).

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We think your work is interesting because it invites us to look not only to the economy, but toward the background conditions of possibility that capitalism "free rides" upon. Namely, nature, or the environment, public powers, and unpaid or poorly paid forms of labor such as historically gendered "domesticated" labor and historically racialized "expropriated" labor. We take this to mean that when thinking about democratizing the economy, we should focus not only on production and distribution but on the relationship between capitalism and its background conditions and search for ways we can institutionalize practices and social relations that generate a more harmonious coexistence between these different spheres.

We're not only interested in your more recent work. You also have a very expansive body of work that that intersects with concerns of participatory and deliberative democrats at various points. We propose to start with your more recent critique of capitalism, and then we'll move through to the topography of capital, concerns with participatory parity, and to end, we'd like to focus on how your current work relates to engagement with participatory and deliberative democracy.

Nick and I are going to take turns going through these different aspects. I'll hand it over to Nick now to begin the first set of questions.

Nick Vlahos: Thank you, Adrian, that's an excellent introduction. Nancy, in the first section of this talk, we're interested in your thoughts about the relationship between democracy and capitalism. We can start with your statement that "capitalism is back" and yet the current boom is largely rhetorical, a symptom of the desire for critique, but perhaps falling short of contributing to anything substantive. Where do you think the field or academia is in terms of thinking about democracy and capitalism?

Nancy Fraser: That was part of an essay in the *New Left Review* (Fraser 2014), which then became the first chapter of *Cannibal Capitalism.* It's been quite a while since that time, and I would say that after that intervention, I've been quite impressed with the amount of intellectual work and activism that has developed and is taking on an explicitly anti-capitalist frame. It's not to say that this work has become intellectually hegemonic or that this political practice has revolutionized society. But it is a pretty impressive development, because it's very integrative. I mean, people on a broad scale on the left are dissatisfied with the single-issue politics and thinking. For example, theorists are increasingly interested in probing the relation between democracy and capitalism, because that's a tense relation. Normative ideals of how democracy should look become problematic if we don't understand the system that perverts, constrains and limits it.

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Nick Vlahos: Absolutely. In the past, you've critiqued thoughts on solutions to the democratic crisis as politicist. Can you explain this concept further?

Nancy Fraser: That was a term I coined as an analogy to economism. The idea of economism is an insult hurled usually at Marxists. But let's leave that aside. Economism is the idea that the official economic level of society is "the base, and everything else is superstructure." And that's the thing you really must look at; if you just take care to get that right, everything else will sort itself out as a matter of course. Now that is a very reductionist idea, and I wouldn't defend it. But I think a structurally analogous charge can be leveled against a lot of political science and political theory that treats the political as if it were the base of everything and could be abstracted out from the larger social totality, understood on its own terms, and could be fixed on its own terms. We just need the right kind of procedure, the right kind of deliberative model, the right kind of electoral set up, the right kind of parliamentary representation. All those things that political scientists are concerned with are fixated on the political without paying attention to anything else. And in fact, once we fix the political, everything else will take care of itself because the political is, so to speak, the master instance of society. That position is as reductive, as vulgar, as wrong, as economism. I'm trying to say that what these spheres that we call "the economy" or "the political" or "the state" are integrated parts of a social totality. In a social totality, a true totality in the Hegelian sense, you can't understand any part abstracted from the other parts. It's the relations of the parts that count. So, I would like to resituate the work of political science, the work of political theory, in a broader social theory, a critical theory of society that understands the way a capitalist economic organization, various family forms, various ways of organizing labor, and ways of organizing this domain that we call "the political" are all mutually co-constitutive, defining, and affecting.

Nick Vlahos: That's a great analogy. Is this level of politicism something you notice in democratic theory?

Nancy Fraser: I have to say, first of all, I'm trained as a philosopher and not as a political scientist. I've done work that would count as political theory. But I'm probably less attuned to what goes on in the discipline of political science and political theory as a subfield of that. But I was struck by the importance of work by people like Colin Crouch (2017), Wolfgang Streeck (2017), and Wendy Brown (2019). These were all people who were thinking politically in a way that was taking in what they thought of

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either as neoliberalism or as neoliberal capitalism. They were very interested in the impact of neoliberalization on democratic political forms. That work really struck me, and I tried to find a way of both appreciating the many insights that thinkers like that really developed but also wanting to push it further to say this is not just about neoliberalism. We really have to understand capitalism itself as a social totality that carves out a specific and relatively limited place for the political. Hence the prospects for democracy are already quite limited within a capitalist society, even within the most democratically inclined forms of capitalist society.

Nick Vlahos: Do you think this level of politicism—in other words, not looking at the totality—limits the ability to diagnose crisis?

Nancy Fraser: Yes. That's a good angle on this that's quite revelatory. I think there is a tendency to think that we live in a time of democratic crisis. Authoritarianism erupting everywhere, horrific right-wing populists and dictators, and so on, are elected and able to stay in power throughout the world. So, we formed the idea that democracy is in a crisis, as if this were a freestanding crisis. I want to say that crisis in the political sphere cannot be disconnected from a crisis in the economy, from a crisis in social reproduction, and from a crisis of ecology. These are all today mutually interlinked, expressions of a crisis of the whole social order. So, I think it's a general crisis that we face today. It's true that there might be some periods in which we have sectoral crises in one or two spheres that are not metastasizing in the form of a general crisis. But even when you get a sectoral political crisis, you can't understand it on its own terms. It needs to be understood as a situated development within a broader social totality that has crisis tendencies of various kinds and sometimes succeeds in softening some of those tendencies by just placing them onto other spheres. All forms of crisis that we experience, including political crisis, democratic crisis, have their roots in the broader social totality of capitalist society. And I would like to trace the roots of our political crisis to crisis tendencies within that whole social formation.

Nick Vlahos: Absolutely. That leads us to future directions, courses of action. Where do you think the field needs to go, then? Where should we be, especially thinking about how to trace those routes in terms of the social totality.

Nancy Fraser: This is going to sound silly, but I just think people have to read widely. People who work in the political science, political theory, and political analysis fields have a lot of expertise. They know a lot of

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stuff, but they allow themselves to be contained within a disciplinary boundary. If they don't read political economy, if they don't read feminist theory, if they don't read ecological literature, and so on, they're no worse off than anyone else. Our intellectual life as academics is organized in these siloed disciplinary fields, and everybody is trained in one of them and hired in one of them, if they're lucky enough to get a job at all. Then there's this narrowing specialization that sets in, and I think what we need is a constant struggle against that. I just think one must get out of one's comfort zone and put oneself in positions where you're reading and talking to people who have other bodies of expertise. And in my career the most exciting discussions have been those where people figure out how to connect, how to integrate across boundaries. I don't think there's any magic bullet, but we need spaces and milieux that encourage this—organizations, conferences, journals, and so on that that encourage this.

Adrian Bua: The pressures placed upon academics to specialize are an important reason why we can't think more generally about the social order and make, as Marx said, revolutionary fire out of looking at intersections between disciplines. The incentive structures of academia really militate against that.

A big bell rang in my head when I read your paper on legitimation crisis. I was initiating my career in participatory and deliberative democracy and noted there was a lot of good work and specialized knowledge around institutional and process design, including how to facilitate conversations to ensure discursive equality, but it was being channeled into the democratization of institutions that have quite little power.

One of the things we want to do in in this special issue of *Democratic Theory* is to channel that specialized knowledge toward more socially consequential areas of life, and I think your work on the topography of capitalism is very important in this respect. It is a really powerful depiction of the mutual imbrication between the productive, socially reproductive, natural, and political spheres. It charts their co-evolution, analyzing how capitalism reproduces itself by feeding upon these background spheres.

Since we've been talking about politicism, could I ask you to talk about the political arena and how it's affected by the crises of capitalism?

Nancy Fraser: The key is what I said before about political crisis not being freestanding. It's also a mistake to think that everything went south with neoliberalism. I want to start with the proposition that, by definition, every capitalist society institutes as a fundamental feature of its structure a division or separation between market and state: between the economic and the political. That boundary is fraught with tension

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and attracts a great deal of jockeying and contestation, and sometimes even outright struggle. Capitalism makes that division and then has the problem of how they're going to relate. There are a lot of different agendas, interests and ideologies concerning how that should work.

Political capacities, governance capacities, ordering capacities, repressive capacities, all these things are essential to the operation of the capitalist economy. You can't accumulate capital; you can't buy and sell; you can't secure property titles without a legal system that constitutes private property and the rules of exchange. You can't operate without regulatory capacities. Especially as capitalism developed historically, the state has had to intervene to deal with frequent depressions, stock market crashes, bouts of mass unemployment, and so on. It has had to, at least, compensate for market failures. But sometimes it has had to also be proactive in preventing crises, breaking up monopolies, and tiding people over during recession.

Karl Polanyi's (1944) great insight is that the process of capital accumulation is not self-regulating. It needs an external political force. It's like Odysseus saying, "tie me to the mast so that I do not engage in self-destruction." But I don't want to speak only of the state but of public power, because public power can operate at many different levels from municipalities, local villages, regional powers, nation-states, and even global public powers. So a public power and public governance capacity is required to enable capital accumulation by creating and regulating markets through law. However, at the same time, capital is hardwired to weaken and elude those public powers, to reduce the tax payments that sustain them, to capture regulatory agencies, to offshore operations, to weaken jurisdictions or render them nominal, and so forth.

This is a permanent tension in any capitalist society, no matter where you draw the line between state and market, no matter how much you beef one up or weaken the other, the problem is always there. Added to this is the globalization of the economy as one global space for business. It operates alongside the division of the political system into states, from hegemons to client states, producing divided jurisdictions. This adds another level of tension. States at various points in history have tried to secure "their" economy, "their" national champions, "their" industries, and so on. But that is a more difficult prospect today. That's part of what neoliberalization means: the relative weakening of state capacity vis-à-vis global investment flows, even with respect to relatively powerful states.

The relation between the economic and the political is one in which capital depends on the political but is also primed to try to evade and weaken it, producing a destabilizing tension at the heart of the social form that periodically can erupt into acute crises. Eruptions of political crises

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at different moments, in capitalism's history, can be part of a broader general crisis of the type I think we are living in now. It is one strand of what we could call a crisis complex that also includes economic crisis, financial crisis, social reproductive crisis, ecological crisis, you name it. When this happens, it creates a very difficult problem, because the political is needed to fix problems in these other spheres. But if governance capacities are weakened and frayed, they are incapable of addressing other crisis tendencies. This creates more political chaos. One response is then that "democracy doesn't work; it is not able to solve our problems; we need a strong man."

Finally, these periods of general crises, at least in the past, have been resolved through the invention of a new form of capitalism, which organizes the relation between economy and polity in a somewhat different way. A fix is produced that can contain the tensions for a while. However, because this tension is permanent, because it is part of the institutional design, these fixes are not definitive. They postpone; they displace; they allow certain kinds of resolutions, but those generate new problems.

Adrian Bua: Regarding state capacity, you mentioned earlier that you've been influenced by Wolfgang Streeck (2014; 2016). This is someone who has written a lot about the inability of the capitalist state to act in the long-term interests of capital, as during the social democratic compromise. Do you agree with that? Do you think we're at a point at which capitalism has devoured the abilities of public power and human agency to imagine, let alone institute, an alternative social order, but even to bang capitalist heads together, so to speak, and force capital to act in its own long-term interests?

Nancy Fraser: I very much admire Streeck's account of the unraveling of the social democratic settlement, the class compromise, the way of activating and enhancing state regulatory power in the social democratic era for the sake of saving capitalism from the capitalists. I admire his account of the phases of its unraveling, and the stealth installation of neoliberalism, and I do think that we are in a very severe situation right now. But I do have a disagreement with Streeck. If I understand him, he thinks that it is possible to, in theory at least, put the global genie back in the national bottle. He thinks that maybe we could go back to something like national social democracy. I think that train has left the station. I don't think we're going back to any orderly form of tamed social democratic capitalism. We could end up in a very fragmented, balkanized world. But this would not be a social democratic paradise. This would be a very ugly, everyone-for-themselves kind of story, should it ever eventuate.

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But that doesn't mean I don't have hope. Capitalism has not destroyed human agency. It has destroyed how this agency was parceled up and re-organized as part of one institutional setup at one phase of its development. People have the agency that they've always had, but their ability to exercise it is curtailed unless we change the institutional design of the society and, above all, unless we disable this demonic drive to accumulate capital and appropriate profit for the sake of more and more accumulation, ad nauseam. I'm with Marx. We need to disable that driving force at the heart of our society. That force has basically taken over our agency. It has become the subject that stands against us and basically devours our agency for its ends, not permitting us to use that agency for our ends, or even to be able to imagine what our ends might be in a different system. So it's not about making an empirical prediction on what is likely. I'm probably as pessimistic as anybody, given the way things look right at this moment. But I think that we're on a path to oblivion. What else can we do? I'm not willing to just go quietly into that night. Well, what else can we do but try for change?

I would use a phrase of Walter Benjamin's which is to "pull the emergency brake." Whereas Marx had thought revolution was the locomotive of history, Benjamin famously said maybe we should think of it as pulling the emergency brake on a runaway train. It's not such a utopian image, but we're in such a dire situation that you have to adopt the Gramscian posture of "optimism of the will, pessimism of the intellect." In theory, there are ways of doing things differently that could avert all of this. The problem is how do we get there from here, given the amount of political insanity that is rampant in the world? And given the power of the forces against us. I don't just mean the fascist or proto-fascist political leaders of our time, but also the power of Apple, Google, Citibank, Goldman Sachs, and so on.

Adrian Bua: That's a great description of the political manifestations of capitalist crises and how they relate to the economy. Could you give an overview of the mutual imbrication between the economic, natural, and reproductive spheres in your analysis?

Nancy Fraser: It's basically the same account I just gave of this perverse, contradictory relationship between dependence, division, and disavowal that characterizes the relationship between economy and polity. Capitalism divides production from reproduction. It divides exploited, so-called free labor from expropriated, unfree labor; it divides the core from the periphery, although in a different way from in the past. It divides human society from nonhuman nature. These are all divisions that

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are institutionalized within the design of a capitalist society, and I don't think that anything can count as a capitalist society that doesn't have one version or another of these divisions. But these divisions mask dependencies. Capital requires unwaged care work to maintain its labor supply. It requires expropriated, unfree labor to make free, exploitable labor, profitable. It requires the construction of nature as a tap for free inputs and a sink for waste. As well as the political conditions provided by public power, capital depends on all those background conditions, and in relation to these it also disavows its dependence. It doesn't pay the cost of ecological reproduction; it doesn't pay the cost of social reproduction for formally free, exploited labor; and it obviously doesn't pay the reproduction costs of unfree labor, which it expropriates on a massive scale, globally. Here too, we have contradictory tendencies. It depends on something that at the same time it incentivizes to trash, and over time, that is a formula for instability and crisis. So I'm suggesting that there are contradictory, crisis producing tendencies between capitalism and at least these four background conditions of possibility. These are structural dispositions to crisis that are in the DNA of a capitalist society. It generates trade-offs and displacements among them, producing moments in which they all become acute simultaneously and exacerbate one another, as is the case contemporarily.

Nick Vlahos: What you were just depicting overlaps with your concept of justice. You've had a lot of rich exchanges in the *New Left Review* quite some time ago with Iris Marion Young, and I'm sure it's carried forward in your recent writings (Fraser 1995, 1997b; Young 1997). Participatory parity represents an important normative orientation for you, can you describe what it means?

Nancy Fraser: At one level, this was an intervention in philosophical debates of the time about the theory of justice. In the United States and in the Anglophone world more broadly, there was a period starting in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s of tremendous creativity. A lot of it was in analytic philosophy, the debates between John Rawls, Robert Nozick, Amartya Sen, Ronald Dwarkin, Elizabeth Anderson, and so on were excellent. These are all great figures within this somewhat narrow area, although it's not that narrow. I followed all those debates, and I was also struck by the developing split within the left in the United States and elsewhere, between the so-called social left and the so-called cultural left. Not that these terms are exactly the right terms for, as I thought of them, the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition. I thought that whole split was problematic in that capitalism splits how we think about

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justice as if there are two different spheres and two different kinds of justice.

So, I started out by arguing that you couldn't have real egalitarian redistribution without real egalitarian reciprocal recognition, and vice versa. So, it wasn't about which was right, the cultural left versus the social left. The left had to integrate all of this in a broader conception of justice. Then I developed the idea that arguments about how to think about distributive justice were not adequate in this broader frame. I developed this idea of "parity of participation," the idea being that a just society was one in which there were no distributive barriers or recognition barriers, and later I added representation barriers to full participation on terms of parity with your fellows in society. It was meant to bring together ideas of distributive justice, ideas of recognition, and ideas of equal representation or equal political voice together under one framework. I soon found that it was necessary to distinguish what I called first order participation from meta participation, and this gets us directly into the political end of things. Meaning, it wouldn't be sufficient to say that we had a just society where everyone could participate in terms of parity in the economy, in social reproduction.

There was also this question of the meta design of the whole. Which forms of participation do we want to even have in our society? Should they be separated institutionally from one another or not? How do you deal with their interactions with each other if we're thinking about different spheres of participation and social action? So, I soon found that I had to really think a lot more about the political. The political is the sphere by which we reflect, or we should be reflecting, on the whole. And so there we have a kind of meta-agency, or an agency about agency, or participation about participation. That's what I think is special about the political. But again, if we accept the delineation of these spheres, and arenas of participation that we are given in a capitalist society, what have we done? We've basically outsourced that meta capacity for reflection on the whole that is so important. We've outsourced that to the capitalist class, because it's their investment decisions geared again to this infernal spiraling of profit beyond profit. They are basically in charge of how everything develops, the shape the whole takes. And that's what we have to take back from them.

Nick Vlahos: This is also important through a lens of democratizing the economy. If substantive social and economic equality is needed to enhance a participatory and deliberative system of public discourse, have we moved closer to bracketing as opposed to eliminating inequality? How does participatory parity relate to democratizing the economy?

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Nancy Fraser: That very distinction between bracketing social inequality and trying to deliberate as if we were peers, when in fact we're not, is key. Eliminating those parity impeding inequalities was central to my work on the public sphere, including my reflections on Jürgen Habermas and the public sphere (Fraser 1997a). I think that liberal democracy is premised on the idea that you can simply bracket those things and pretend they don't exist. We act as if we are equal. Our political system is designed as if we are equal when the whole society is organized so that we cannot possibly be equal. This is, you know, again another contradiction, so to speak. That's why many people intuit this problem and think that there's some other kind of democracy beyond liberal democracy that can better deal with that. We have people talking about radical democracy or deliberative democracy, or participatory democracy, and I think that impulse is a good impulse. The problem is making good on that impulse requires not simply trying to make democracy better within its assigned sphere of decision-making and institutions, but actually democratizing the larger project of deciding things, like where you're going to draw the line between a state and a market, assuming you still are going to have some markets somewhere. I assume we would but maybe not at the levels and of the sort we have now. I would distinguish between democracy within a pre-delimited sphere that leaves many very consequential and pressing decisions outside the political sphere and the democratization of societal design in the broader sense of sphere-making or domain-making, as the legal theorists talk about re-domaining. I'm for deliberative democracy and participatory democracy, but the question is, within what? And which processes and decisions are going to be subject to that form of social decision-making, and which are left to armies and bankers who have nothing to do with that kind of process?

Adrian Bua: As a final question, in the Special Issue, we draw on your work to make the argument that participatory and deliberative democracy has focused too much on government institutions and has been reticent to engage with the economy, both in the traditional way of thinking about the economy in terms of production, distribution, and exchange, but also in terms of how the economy relates to these background conditions of possibility.

We argue that a critical political economy focus can provide a structural compass that can direct the reforming energies of participatory and deliberative democracy toward more powerful institutions. However, we also argue that critical political economy is too focused on critique. We argue that this can lead to propositional paralysis. So do you think it is preferred to move beyond pure critique as we think about democratizing the economy and its relationship with its background conditions?

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Nancy Fraser: Great question. I think that it's partly a division of labor within that larger conversation that I was describing at the outset that that transgresses disciplinary boundaries. We should also transgress boundaries between pure critique and pure visionary thinking, so to speak. These have to be in conversation, clearly. I've become, I guess, a professional critic. This is what I know how to do. By contrast, I've done very little myself that you could describe as imagining desirable alternatives. Very recently, I wrote something about William Morris and emancipated labor. He is one of those thinkers who combines a very hard-headed Marxian critical political economy of capitalism with a feel for art, nature, and new ways of living, which I was really inspired by because there are so few people who can bring those two things together. Too much of the visionary is disconnected from the critical, and it becomes that dreaded, anti-Hegelian figure of the pure ought. That's one piece of the picture. How change happens, through social struggle or in organized movements in unions and political parties, and all the various organizational forms in which people undertake radical action for deep structural and emancipatory social change. What inspires them? It can't just be that things are terrible, although I wouldn't discount that. It must also be inspiration, some sense that there is an alternative. And what is it that makes a particular alternative seem not just feasible, but really desirable? Real change-making necessarily has to have a utopian dimension. I do not think that is among my skills, but I read a lot of fiction. I think film and fiction are places where forms of theory and critique take on some flesh, as I argue in a *New Left Review* article about Ishiguro (Fraser 2012).

However, critique and imagination of alternatives are unfortunately too separated from each other. I think we need individual thinkers who are good at imagining alternatives, but there's no real substitute for the creativity of people engaged in social movements.

Nick Vlahos: I want to wrap up, but I don't want to leave you thinking that you've done little in imagining desirable alternatives—far from it. You've really advanced how we should think beyond idealized single public spheres and account for the role of counter-publics and social struggle, your vision of the different hidden abodes in capitalism, and the way the political sphere should be integrated and connected to these adjacent spheres within a capitalist economy.

Nancy Fraser: Thank you. Let me add one point, because it's true that the last chapter of *Cannibal Capitalism* is a kind of preliminary, almost primitive, and exploratory attempt to say something about what an expanded view of socialism would be that could constitute an alternative to the very perverse expanded capitalism that we have now.

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