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Political theory

Nancy Fraser: "Cannibal Capitalism" Is on Our Horizon

- Features -

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For the last three decades, American political theorist Nancy Fraser has been providing the Left with some of its most compelling ideas. At times, these ideas are pointedly political, as when Fraser calls for feminism to cut its ties with the economic elite and embrace a working-class politics that can attack the root causes of oppression. At other times, they are powerfully theoretical, as when Fraser analyzes the interaction between capitalism and the "background conditions" on which capitalism depends and that it can't completely subordinate.

Fraser's recent work finds her pushing for a synthesis of the practical and theoretical, in the interest of avoiding the onrushing disaster of what she, in [her forthcoming book](#), calls "cannibal capitalism": the prospect that capitalism, by invading all spheres of life, might destroy its and, more important, our own conditions for survival.

In a recent interview with Jacobin América Latina editor Martín Mosquera, Fraser explained that her interest lies in providing an X-ray of modern capitalism and its crises in order to give activists a road map to act politically and in unison, as part of an ever larger collective.

The Left, says Fraser, is starting to recover a sense of unified power after decades obsessed with breaking itself into smaller, inward-looking subunits. But there's still a lot of work ahead. To build collective power, we need to better understand how all the parts of modern capitalist society fit together. We need, Fraser insists, to embrace a populist-style political movement where everyone's different grievances can find expression but remain unified by a socialist agenda that gives us a common vision of where we're headed.

In her interview with Mosquera, Fraser spoke about the future scenarios that loom on the horizon if we don't act decisively to undermine capital's power and about the challenges of building a common front for political struggle.

MM: In your most recent work, you've been developing what you call an "expanded conception of capitalism." Why do existing concepts of capitalism need to be expanded? Is it that they are too narrowly focused on capitalism as an economic system?

NF: Yes, that's right. I developed the expanded conception of capitalism in order to get away from base-superstructure versions of Marxism, which view the economic system as the real foundation of society, while treating everything else as a mere "superstructure." In that model, causality flows in one direction only, from the economic base to the legal-political superstructure. And that is deeply inadequate. My alternative is focused on rethinking the relationship of the economic subsystem of capitalist society to its necessary background conditions of possibility processes, activities, and relations that are considered noneconomic, but that are absolutely essential to capitalism's economy, like social reproduction, nonhuman nature, and public goods.

This complicates that base-superstructure picture. To say that something is a necessary background condition means that the capitalist economic system cannot function without it: capitalism's ability to purchase labor power and put it to work, to access raw materials and energy, to produce commodities and sell them at a profit, to accumulate capital, none of that can happen unless these "noneconomic" conditions are in place. Thus, the background conditions have their own causal weight. They are not mere "epiphenomena."

Take the example of social reproduction: the activities, often performed by women outside the official economy, that

sustain the human beings who constitute "labor." So, for example, the birthing, caring, socializing, and educating of new generations; but also, the replenishment of adult workers, who have to be fed, bathed, clothed, and rested in order to return to the job the next day -- all of this is necessary for the functioning of the capitalist economy. This argument has been developed by feminists doing so-called social reproduction theory, which is a variant of Marxist feminism. It shows that if social reproduction goes awry, it can really make trouble for economic production. And that means that capital accumulation is constrained by kinship relations, birth rates, mortality rates, et cetera. So, we already have a more complicated picture than unidirectional causation.

A parallel case could be made for natural or ecological background conditions. Capitalist production and accumulation presuppose the availability of the material stuff on which production depends -- raw materials, sources of energy, sinks for disposing of waste. And if these conditions are jeopardized, that too can gum up the works. We have an interesting example of that right now with COVID-19, which is, at one level, an ecological dysfunction. The virus emerged as a threat to humans through a zoonotic spillover, a transfer to us from bats through some intermediate species, possibly pangolins, probably as a result of climate- and "development"-induced species migrations. The result has been an enormous contraction of the whole economic system. COVID-19 is a really good example of causation that goes the other way.

MM: As you point out, capitalism is not a completely autonomous economic system, in the sense that it both draws and depends on background conditions that are in some way external to it. But even if all these spheres are relatively independent of one another, the economic system can still act on and transform the other spheres. Isn't one of the peculiarities of capitalism that it has the capacity to shape areas outside it, like nature?

NF: There is definitely something special about a capitalist economy that gives it great causal dynamism: the imperative to accumulate capital and to expand "value" without limit. As we know, a capitalist economy is not one in which you make some money and then sit back and enjoy life in your beautiful manor estate and consume it all. Rather, there is the imperative of reinvestment, aimed at generating ever greater quantities of surplus value, ever greater profits, and ever more capital. That is a powerful force, which inclines the owners of capital to push the envelope, to try to bend the noneconomic conditions to their will. But their ability to do that is not absolute. It is subject to pushback, including from a nature that proceeds at its own pace, on its own schedule. The temporality of ecological reproduction is not, in the end, within capitalist control. So, it makes good sense to speak of "relatively autonomous" spheres that are posited as "noneconomic."

But capital's expansionist drive is a brute and blind compulsion, and it is hardwired into the system. It is much more powerful than the will of the individual human beings who own capital and are incentivized to expand its value -- as it were, carrying out "its will." This drive is so powerful that it has managed to reshape its own background conditions (family, nature, state forms, and so on), albeit within limits, as I just said. What I'm trying to suggest is that Marxists are absolutely right to insist on the power and shaping force of the accumulation dynamic. But it is a mistake to translate that idea into a base-superstructure picture of causality. There is a lot of pushback, because these background conditions have their grammars and temporalities of reproduction and because they harbor "noneconomic" values that people care about and that influence their actions.

MM: As you point out, the COVID crisis is a dramatic example of how these externalities interact in complicated ways with capitalism, leading to the kind of capitalist crises that you've described as "multidimensional." Elsewhere, you've also suggested that, at least since 2008, the current stage of financialized, neoliberal capitalism is undergoing a crisis -- perhaps terminal -- that could eventually mean a historical shift to a different form of capitalist accumulation. How do you evaluate the current crisis?

NF: I want to underline several points that are already implicit in the way you pose the question. One is that we

should distinguish between sectoral crises and general crises. A sectoral crisis means that there is one significant area in a given capitalist regime of accumulation or phase of capitalist development that is overtly dysfunctional, while others appear to be more or less okay. We often tend to think of economic crises as sectoral in just this way. Historians could point to numerous examples of such sectoral crises, which pertain to one realm of society only. But that's different from a general crisis of the whole social order. The concept of a general crisis suggests a convergence or overdetermination of several major impasses and strands of dysfunction. Not just one sector, but all or nearly all major societal sectors are in crisis and are exacerbating one another. That was the case in the 1930s, for example.

I suspect that we are living through a general crisis of this sort now. Certainly, we have seen severe forms of economic crisis, like the 2007-8 financial near-meltdown. And although it may have looked as if our rulers found a way to patch that up, that crisis is not really solved. Pervasive financialization remains a ticking time bomb. But, as the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report shows, our economic woes have converged with another very severe, even catastrophic crisis: namely, global warming. This ecological crisis has been brewing for a long time and is now becoming palpable. More and more segments of the global population, including segments that have been relatively insulated from its worst effects, are awakening to it.

There is also, as I said before, a crisis of social reproduction, which is stressing or depleting our capacities for creating, caring for, and sustaining human beings: childcare and eldercare, education and health care. As states disinvest from public provision, and as depressed wage levels force us to devote more hours to paid work, the system gobbles up the time and energy needed for care work. So, that sector too is in crisis, especially in pandemic conditions. One could say that COVID has greatly exacerbated the preexisting crisis of social reproduction. But it would be just as true to say that the preexisting crisis of social reproduction (including disinvestment from public health infrastructure and social provision) has greatly exacerbated the effects of COVID.

Finally, we also face a major political crisis. This is, at one level, a crisis of governance, meaning that even powerful states like the United States lack the capacity to solve the problems the system generates. They are depleted, paralyzed by gridlock and outgunned by megacorporations, which have captured virtually all regulatory agencies and engineered huge tax cuts for themselves and for the rich. Deprived of revenue for decades, states have allowed their infrastructures to crumble and have depleted their stockpiles of essential public goods, such as personal protective equipment (PPE). They are, by definition, unable to deal with questions like climate change, which are not containable within any jurisdictional borders. The upshot is an acute crisis of governance at the structural level. But there's also a political crisis at another level, a crisis of hegemony in the Gramscian sense: the widespread defection from politics as usual, from the established political parties and elites who have been tarnished by association with neoliberalization, and the appearance of previously unthinkable populisms—some potentially emancipatory, others decidedly not.

The upshot is that we now face a tangle of multiple crises: an economic crisis, a crisis of social reproduction, an ecological crisis, and a two-sided political crisis. To my mind, this adds up to a general crisis of capitalist society. Its effects pop out all over, first here, then there, then somewhere else, like a metastasizing cancer. Every effort to patch up one outbreak only leads to others, afflicting other sectors, regions, populations, until the whole social body is overwhelmed. The experience of general crisis has become palpable for many people, but that doesn't mean that it will produce a total breakdown or revolutionary climax any time soon. Capitalist crises can go on for decades, unfortunately. One could say that the whole first half of the twentieth century up until the defeat of fascism at the end of World War II was just one long, roiling general crisis of liberal-colonial capitalism. So, we might be in for a long slog.

MM: COVID certainly seems to have limited our predictive capacities. Nevertheless, it seems important to play out different future scenarios based on present tendencies—if only to think about how to guide our actions toward more emancipatory scenarios and away from catastrophic ones.

NF: Agreed. I'm happy to think through possible scenarios, while stressing that I am not making predictions. I would start by considering whether the current crisis is "developmental" or "epochal." That's a distinction we owe to the Binghamton school. An epochal crisis is a crisis of capitalism as such; its resolution requires the overcoming of that system, its replacement by some new non- or postcapitalist form of society. By contrast, a developmental crisis is specific to a given "regime of accumulation" or phase within capitalism's history and can be resolved, at least temporarily, by its replacement by a new regime different and yet still capitalist. In that case, the system's constitutive divisions between commodity production and social reproduction, "the economic" and "the political," human society and nonhuman nature, exploitation and expropriation would not be eliminated but "only" redrawn.

Those divisions exist in one form or another in every phase of capitalism but are sites of contradiction. Each of them harbors a crisis tendency (economic, ecological, social, or political) that is bound to lead to trouble sooner or later. A given regime can manage to soften or finesse those contradictions for a while, but not forever. Eventually, they erupt in plain sight and the regime enters an overt crisis, setting off a frantic search for a fix and intense struggles over what the fix should look like. But those who are living through those struggles cannot know for sure whether the outcome will be a new regime within capitalism or a postcapitalist alternative. That only becomes clear post hoc, with the benefit of hindsight.

So far, every general crisis in capitalism's history has proved to be "merely" developmental. The general crisis of the mercantile phase led to the liberal-colonial regime of the nineteenth century, whose crisis led in turn to the state-managed regime of the mid-twentieth century, which itself gave way to the financialized capitalism of the present era. In each case, the new regime provisionally defused the developmental crisis of its predecessor before eventually succumbing to its own. In each case, however, many social actors believed that the crisis they were experiencing was epochal and would end by abolishing capitalism. But they underestimated the system's inventiveness, its capacity for self-transformation.

We should keep this history in mind as we try to understand our own situation. It's possible that some aspects of our current crisis could be developmental, specific to the financialized regime. But maybe not all. The ecological strand is the one that makes me think that we could be facing something different, a genuine epochal crisis, whose resolution requires overcoming capitalism once and for all.

If so, then there are several possible scenarios. These include some desirable ones, like global democratic ecosocialism. Of course, it's hard to say exactly what that would look like, but let's assume it would dismantle the "law of value," abolish exploitation and expropriation, and reinvent the relations between human society and nonhuman nature, between goods production and caregiving, between "the political" and "the economic," democratic planning and markets. That's the "good" end of our spectrum of possibilities. At the other end lie some noncapitalist outcomes that are truly terrible: massive societal regression under warring strongmen or a global authoritarian regime. There is also, of course, a third possibility, which is that the crisis doesn't get resolved at all, but simply continues to grind away in an orgy of societal self-cannibalization until there's little left that's recognizably human.

As I said, I'm not making any predictions here. But I will say that if those are our present options, we'd better start fighting like hell for the first scenario. And that means working to build a new counterhegemonic bloc that can unite all the potentially emancipatory forces behind a project of eco-societal transformation. In a recent article in [New Left Review](#), I tried to outline this strategy and explain the thinking behind it. My idea is that such a project is best conceived as anti-capitalist and transenvironmental: anti-capitalist because capitalism harbors a built-in structural tendency to ecological crisis and is the principal socio-historical driver of climate change; and transenvironmental because the system's ecological contradiction is inextricably entangled with its other contradictions (economic, political, social) and cannot be resolved in abstraction from them. The upshot is that green activists must make common cause with those fighting for labor rights, livelihoods, and food security; for a revaluation of care work and public investment in social reproduction; against expulsion and exclusion of migrants; against land dispossession, authoritarianism, and racial-imperial oppression.

What makes such a transenvironmental coalition possible in principle is the "convenient" fact that all these social ills find their roots in one and the same social system — namely, capitalism. That system could, or rather, should be treated as the common enemy of the various coalition partners and as a joint focus of their various activisms. If they adopted an anti-capitalist stance, ecopolitical currents that are now divided could join forces with one another — and with "nonenvironmental" social movements. I'm thinking of movements for degrowth, environmental justice, and a Green New Deal, which are often at odds nowadays. As I see them, each of the three has both genuine insights and disabling blind spots. I'm betting that the insights could be amplified and the blind spots corrected if these currents were resituated in a counterhegemonic bloc that is transenvironmental and anti-capitalist. In that case, their specific programs, such as the Green New Deal, would appear less as ends in themselves than as "transitional socialist strategies" (to use an old Trotskyist formulation) en route to a more radical transformation, which we might call "democratic ecosocialism."

In any case, it's impossible to say exactly what will happen and when, because that depends, obviously, on what people do. What I myself am doing these days is trying to clarify the dynamics of the present crisis in its various dimensions. I aim to draw a map of the social totality where activists and potential activists can locate their various concerns, which otherwise tend to remain partial and disconnected. In this way, I hope to convey a sense of where and how these various concerns fit into the overall picture; also, to map the state of play among the contending social forces. My larger aim is practical: to clarify how these forces and these concerns might be most effectively mobilized on behalf of an emancipatory resolution of the crisis.

MM: What you're describing sounds a bit like a populist strategy: the idea that society is made up of inherently partial interests or concerns, where the challenge is to have those diverse interests coalesce into a coherent political agent. You've also spoken favorably of left-wing populism in the past, but recent events seem to suggest that, as a movement, it has limited political viability. Meanwhile, right-wing populism seems to have a better track record.

NF: I started to think seriously about populism in the wake of Occupy Wall Street. I was very struck by the rhetoric of the 99 percent and the 1 percent, which is quintessentially populist. Although it lacks the precision and analytical rigor of class analysis, it is immediately comprehensible and affectively powerful. It was amazing how quickly this language caught on in the United States. That was partly because it was hugely amplified by Bernie Sanders, who spoke of a "system" that was "rigged" on behalf of "the billionaire class." That word, "rigged," proved incredibly powerful, a point that did not escape Donald Trump, who later appropriated it and gave it a different twist.

In any case, the eruption of populist language into the US political universe was quite dramatic. Not only did it presage a major crack in neoliberal hegemony, but it also broke with the particularizing rhetoric prevalent in some "leftish" circles, then engaged in breaking down collective political categories (such as "women") into ever smaller, more discrete units. Talk of "the 99 percent" versus "the 1 percent" went in the opposite direction, toward a larger collective. That suggested to me a growing interest in the United States in building an overarching left coalition. It seemed to express a hunger that people felt, perhaps without even realizing it, for an analysis focused on linkages, one that could help overcome left fragmentation and build a united front — all of which I took to be positive signs.

At the same time, Trump's appropriation of populist rhetoric made it imperative to distinguish left-wing populism from right-wing populism. Each of them offers a map of the social hierarchy, who's up and who's down, who's got their foot on whose neck. But the two maps differ sharply. Left-wing populism's is binary, dividing society into two groups: a small oligarchic elite that accumulates enormous wealth off the back of the vast majority — hence, its project of mobilizing "the 99 percent" against "the 1 percent." In contrast, right-wing populism's map is tripartite, dividing society into three groups. At the top sits the "bloodsucking" elite, at the bottom the "freeloading" underclass, while caught between them and preyed on by both are the virtuous "people." So right-wing populism targets the 1 percent, but also immigrants, people of color, minoritized sexualities, et cetera. That's a very different picture of society and political project.

A second difference is that right-wing populism defines its enemies in particularistic, substantive terms. In the parlance of some Trump supporters, for example, those at the top are "the international Jewish-pedophile cabal," while those at the bottom are "Mexican rapists" or "lazy blacks," both ends characterized concretely, in cultural terms. By contrast, left-wing populists define the enemy functionally, in terms of its role in the social system—hence "Wall Street" or "the billionaire class." It's true, of course, that functional terms can slide into identitarian terms, as when "Wall Street" morphs into "Jewish bankers." So, there is no absolute wall between the two populisms, and care must be taken by those on the Left to stop any impending slide. But this difference between them, like the previous one, is politically and morally significant. And let's not forget: left populism's binary "functional" sociology is far closer to the truth than the right's tripartite identitarianism. Finance really does expropriate the vast majority in contemporary capitalism, whereas "the underclass" does not really prey on "the people."

The next question is whether left-wing populism, so defined, can serve as a transitional formation that wins victories, widens its reach, deepens its societal critique, and becomes more radical. There is also the question of whether it can educate people in the course of struggle, clarifying the system they're fighting, explaining exactly how that system is rigged. My guess is that left populism offers an accessible entry point into class struggle. I'm less sure that it can succeed in generating genuine insight as to how the "system" really works and what really needs to be done in order to change it. I suspect they will need some help from Marxists on those last points. But we'll see.

Now, having said that, I fully agree with you that the record to date of left-wing populism vis-à-vis its right-wing rival is not impressive. Certainly, right-wing populism has been more successful at winning and maintaining the support of large numbers of people. But part of the problem is the disgraceful role played in many countries by ostensibly social democratic and socialist parties and leaders in installing or consolidating neoliberalism: Bill and Hillary Clinton in the United States, Tony Blair in England, Gerhard Schröder in Germany. Both populisms developed in response to that debacle, but the left-wing variant has struggled to distinguish itself from those "progressive neoliberals" who brought us financialization, even as they've tried to capture the working-class base that deserted those parties.

In any case, I don't see any other available strategy. It's crucial for the Left to woo those working-class fractions that are now supporting right-wing populism. And that's a delicate operation. On the one hand, we must not concede an inch to the card-carrying racists within that group. On the other hand, we must not assume that the latter constitute the overwhelming majority of working-class Trump or Jair Bolsonaro voters. If we do that, it's game over. We must start instead by assuming that a significant chunk of those voters can be won for the Left, by way of left populism. And we know for a fact that many of them voted not so long ago for figures like Lula and Barack Obama, only moving right later, when their hopes were disappointed. What a left populism can and must do is validate their legitimate grievances, while offering a different interpretation of what lies behind them, explaining who exactly is rigging what, why the focus on a despised underclass is a dead end, why they'll never be strong enough to defeat the real culprit (global capital and global finance) if they support parties that divide the working class. In other words, our best hope at this point is a left-wing populism that can, in time, develop into a socialist movement of some new type.

MM: How does class struggle fit into that evolution from left-wing populism to a socialist movement? Some would argue that the populist emphasis on uniting multiple antagonisms into a symbolic "people" is not entirely compatible with socialist politics—or at least that version of socialist politics that understands working-class power as "structural," i.e., beginning at the point of production, where workers can potentially use their leverage as producers to generate material political gains.

It seems like your thinking on what you call "boundary struggles" contains some clues. One gets the sense that "boundary struggles" are what class struggle looks like in the context of your expanded conception of capitalism. Would that be fair?

NF: At least within traditional Marxism and mainstream socialist and labor movements, there has historically been a

tendency to think of class struggles in a narrow sense, i.e., as struggles at the point of production over the rate and distribution of surplus value as extracted through exploitation of wage laborers in factories. And then, of course, those struggles are supposed to expand beyond the factory gates, develop a political dimension, and take on other causes further afield. But I still think that, by and large, this image of class struggle, as essentially concerned with wage labor in industrial settings, remains a very powerful image.

That image of class struggle has led many people to argue against what Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau call "class essentialism." In those debates, people argue that class struggle is not the only kind of struggle in capitalist societies, and that it doesn't have a monopoly over what constitutes a just vision of society. Those who decry class essentialism say that socialists and Marxists don't have a monopoly on naming all forms of oppression and injustice. And, in fact, capitalist societies have historically been spaces where there have been tremendous struggles over unfree and dependent labor and various other forms of oppression or domination that do not fit within the conventionally defined parameters of class struggle. In other words, one position is to say: "Class struggles have this one very specific meaning, and, therefore, we need to validate non-class struggles, which mean something else."

But, from another perspective, one could say that the problem is with their narrow definition of class struggle. If we circle back to the earlier part of our conversation, it is the expanded conception of capitalism we were discussing that allows us to see class struggles in a different light. Just as capitalism is not just an economy, class is not just the struggle at the point of production. If you understand capitalism as encompassing all these background conditions, which are necessary for the very specialized locales where surplus value is accumulated off the back of exploited wage labor, you can also grasp that social reproduction is an equally essential component of the system and the way its parts fit together. If you say the same about nature, public goods, regulatory capacities, and the legal forms that we think of as political, then it could very well be that struggles over those things are also anti-capitalist struggles, or at least struggles over essential components of a capitalist system. When inflected in the right way and they're not always, mind you they can also be understood as class struggle.

Struggles over social reproduction have in fact historically been part of class struggle. It's what lay behind the powerful demand of the labor movement for a family wage. That demand was both a literal struggle over the conditions of employment and a struggle over the conditions of social reproduction and home life. It turned out to be a solution that wasn't always great for women or for those portions of the working class that were never considered eligible for a family wage. But you can see that, depending on how we talk about class struggle, things can get complicated very quickly.

So, in one sense, the best solution is to redefine class and class struggle in a more capacious way. But, at the same time, we need to be quite careful to distinguish what it means to say that there is a different sense of class struggle. I say this with a particular concern in mind: to find the best ways to promote the kinds of broad alliances that we need to take on the very large, entrenched powers that must be confronted and dismantled.

To say that these apparently diverse struggles are all class struggles seems, at first glance, to open up possibilities: we're all in it together, and we all have the same enemy. But if we do take this route and adopt an expanded view of capitalism and therefore an expanded view of class struggle and anti-capitalist struggle then the onus is on us to be very attentive to the ways in which such struggles are not immediately harmonized. This is the job of political work, and it is indeed hard work. This takes us back to the left populism idea: you have to create a map showing how these struggles fit together, and how certain ways of constructing them tend to create unnecessary zero-sum games, which could be avoided by a different approach.

In explaining boundary struggles, I sometimes introduce the perspective of Karl Polanyi. Without using the term, Polanyi was really focused on boundary struggles between what he called the self-regulating market and society. What is intriguing and fruitful about that approach is the idea that the fight is not just

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over how surplus value is going to be distributed. It's over what is going to determine the grammar of life. Over whether, in a given community, capital is going to have a free hand or not.

This raises deep questions about who in society actually has the power to shape the grammar of life. In capitalist societies, these are the questions that are surreptitiously removed from the political agenda and devolved behind our backs to capital and to those who are charged with accumulating capital.

To talk about boundary struggles means to try to go beyond questions of distribution and get at the question of how the grammar of social life is organized. Boundary struggles say that there's a real, fundamental issue about where we draw the line between society and nature, paid work and other activities involved in attending to communities and kin relationships, and so on. These questions come down to: What are the legitimate boundaries within which markets can operate? What are the legitimate things that can be bought and sold? I think the point of talking about boundary struggles is to say that these things have always been contested in capitalist societies. It's not that they're an alternative to class struggles, it's that class struggles sometimes take the form of boundary struggles, and boundary struggles when things go well sometimes take the form of class struggles.

Source [Jacobin](#).

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