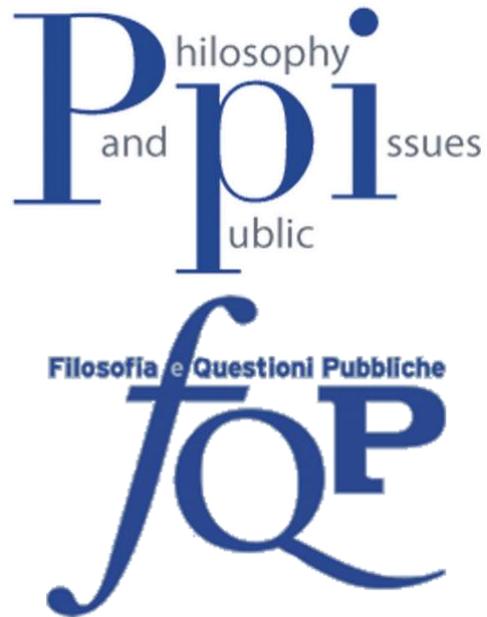


SYMPOSIUM  
CAPITALISM AND CRITICAL THEORY



CAPITALISM, CRITICAL THEORY,  
AND MIGRATIONS

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# Capitalism, Critical Theory, and Migrations

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## Introduction

Some years ago, Nancy Fraser wrote that we were “living through a capitalist crisis of great severity without a critical theory that could adequately clarify it” (Fraser 2014, 157). She went on to argue that we lacked conceptions of capitalism and the capitalist crisis adequate to our time. In *Capitalism. A Conversation in Critical Theory* she suggests a path that could serve as a remedy to fill these two gaps. What she offers is a definition of capitalism as “an institutionalized social order” (Fraser-Jaeggi 2018, 12): this definition avoids reducing capitalism to a purely economic system or a reified form of ethical life; it encompasses instead the social, political, and natural background conditions of capitalism. In this

expanded conception, capitalism is constituted by a set of four structural divisions and institutional separations, which, according to Fraser, are constitutive of capitalism, and give capitalist society its specific form. These are: the ontological division between human nature and non-human nature; the institutional separation of economic production from social reproduction; the institutional separation of economy from polity; the institutionalized distinction between exploitation and expropriation. Fraser highlights that the economic foreground of capitalist society requires non-economic backgrounds (non-human nature, social reproduction, politics). As Jaeggi points out, Fraser's analysis of capitalism as an institutionalized social order differs from the orthodox account in so far as she does not see non-economic backgrounds as superstructure determined by production: quite the opposite, in her view, production is dependent upon them (*ibid.*, 69). This analysis aims to show how capitalism is not accidentally but structurally imbricated with gender oppression, political domination and ecological degradation together with its "equally structural, nonaccidental foreground dynamic of labor exploitation and expropriation".<sup>1</sup> It also aims to promote an understanding of capitalism's instability and its crisis tendency not as economic *per se*, but as "grounded in contradictions between the economic foreground and the non-economic background" (*ibid.*, 177). While capitalism depends on several non-commoditized background conditions (such as unwaged social reproductive

<sup>1</sup> It worth noting that according to Fraser, capitalism's institutional divisions are not simply given once and for all. As she points out: "precisely *where* capitalist societies draw the line between production and reproduction, economy and polity, human and nonhuman nature varies historically under different regimes of accumulation". She understands competitive laissez-faire capitalism, state-managed monopoly capitalism, and globalizing financialized capitalism as "three historically specific ways of demarcating economy from polity, production from reproduction, and human from non-human nature, and exploitation from expropriation" (Fraser 2018, 69).

labor, non-human nature, public powers, as well as the expropriated labor and resources of racialized groups), it nevertheless disavows the value of these activities and resources: the capitalist economy simultaneously needs and destabilizes its own non-economic background conditions (*ibid.*, 178). To these “contradictions of capitalism” – the ecological, the social, and the political – correspond three “crisis tendencies.” Capitalism, therefore, harbors a plurality of crisis tendencies, some of which stem from intra-economic contradictions, while others are grounded in “inter-realm” contradictions: “in contradictions *between* the economic system and its background conditions of possibility – that is, between economy and society, economy and nature, economy and polity” (Fraser 2014, 157). Contradictions are not only internal to the economy but are premised on a view of the relations *among* domains. In her view, all the tensions built into the capitalist social order are grounded in three distinctive features, namely division, dependence, and disavowal. First, capitalism *divides* economy from reproduction, polity, and non-human nature and then it makes economy *dependent* on them. In addition, capitalist societies *disavow* or deny the value that the capitalist economy siphons from these realms constituted as “non-economic.” In so doing, capitalist economies constantly draw value from those realms while simultaneously denying that they have any value. Capitalist society harbors a proclivity to (self-)destabilization along all three of its constitutive boundaries: production/reproduction, economy/polity, human society/non-human nature. All of which represent crisis tendencies specific to, and inherent in, capitalism. Fraser sums this up in a four Ds scheme: division, dependence, disavowal, destabilization (Fraser-Jaeggi 2018, 189 ff.).

Even though she does not directly address the ongoing border/refugee/migrant “crisis”, this four Ds scheme might, nevertheless, be applied to shed new light on the issue. The

migration crisis seems to arise from the way capitalism relates to each of its three background conditions (non-human nature, reproduction, political powers). As regards its relation to non-human nature we may, paraphrasing Fraser (2018) formulate the four Ds scheme as follows:

Capitalist societies *divide* human nature from non-human nature. Its economies are *dependent* on nature (natural resources, raw materials, etc.) in order to operate. But because capital recognizes only monetized forms of value, it draws heavily on natural resources and *disavows* their replacement costs. Geared to endless accumulation, finally, the capitalist economy, endangering the very natural processes that sustain life and provide the material inputs for social provisioning, is primed periodically to *destabilize* the background conditions that it itself needs.

We are currently witnessing the effect of this destabilization in the environmental crisis affecting all nations with the developing countries of the Southern Hemisphere, however, being disproportionately impacted by an excessive share of this global environmental damage. As Fraser points out, “extreme pollution in cities, hyper-extractivism in the countryside, and vulnerability to increasingly lethal impacts of global warming, such as rising seas and extreme weather” have created climate-induced migrations and environmental refugees on a growing scale (Fraser 2018, 125).<sup>2</sup>

What do we learn from the application of the four Ds scheme in relation to the division of human nature from non-human nature? That the capitalist division between human nature and non-human nature and the kind of relationship capitalist society

<sup>2</sup> See <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/07/1043551>

has with non-human nature are among the causes of mass migration. More specifically we learn that the environmental crisis is not due to Homo Sapiens as such, but more specifically to capitalism as an institutionalized social order; consequently, the ongoing phenomenon of climate-induced migrations and environmental refugees would also be partly due to capitalism.

If we apply the four Ds scheme to the relationship between economic production and social re-production, we may reformulate it as follows:

Capitalist societies *divide* economic production from social reproduction, that is – the creation and maintenance of historically gendered, social bonds. It then constitutes their economies as *dependent* (also) on social reproduction in order to operate. But, because capital recognizes only monetized forms of value, it free rides on social reproduction and *disavows* its cost. Geared to endless accumulation, it threatens the sociocultural processes that “supply the solidary relations, affective dispositions, and value horizons that underpin social cooperation while also furnishing the appropriately socialized and skilled human beings who constitute ‘labor’”.<sup>3</sup> In so doing, the capitalist economy consumes and *destabilizes* a background condition of its function, that is – the capacity for social reproduction that it itself needs.<sup>4</sup>

The capabilities available for social reproduction are taken for granted, treated as free and infinitely available “gifts” which require no attention or replenishment. It is assumed that there will always

<sup>3</sup> This social-cultural process “suppl[ies] the solidary relations, affective dispositions, and value horizons that underpin social cooperation while also furnishing the appropriately socialized and skilled human beings who constitute ‘labor’” (Fraser 2014, 157).

<sup>4</sup> See Fraser 2018.

be sufficient energy to sustain the social connections on which economic production, and society more generally, depend; whereas, in fact, social reproductive capacities are not infinite. As Fraser points out, “between increased working hours and public service cutbacks, the financialized capitalist regime is squeezing social reproduction to the breaking point” (Fraser-Jaeggi 2018, 111).

The current, financialized form of capitalism is systematically consuming the capacities to sustain social bonds. The result of this is a ‘care crisis’, which according to Fraser is structural, precisely like the current ecological crisis.

The care crisis has affected and continues to affect migration flows. Historically the separation between economic production and social reproduction has underpinned the domination of women and has relegated them to unpaid care work and to the domestic private space. Today, qualified women pursue demanding professions and subcontract “their traditional care-work to low-waged immigrants or racial/ethnic minorities” (*ibid.*, 210). The inequality that exists in the distribution of reproductive work has changed: women do such work to a greater extent than men, but from a racial and class perspective, we see that reproductive work is performed mostly by migrants and members of minority and stigmatized social groups. We are witnessing a scenario in which reproductive work is divided and delegated from one woman to another: workers in the core countries offload reproductive work “onto migrants from poor regions (often racialized women), who leave their own families in the care of other still poorer women, who must in turn do the same, and on and on” (Fraser-Jaeggi 2018, 111). Hochschild coined the expression “global chains of care” (Hochschild 2000) to suggest the existence of a bond between women from different parts of the world who, in different ways, bear the care burden imposed on

them by gender inequalities. This shift of carework onto migrant women has an impact on their lives: as Fraser says, “today, millions of black and migrant women are employed as caregivers and domestic workers. Often undocumented and away from their families, they are simultaneously exploited and expropriated – forced to work precariously and on the cheap, deprived of rights, and subject to abuses of every stripe” (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser 2019, 45). This shift has an impact also on their countries: as Hochschild pointed out, this produces a “drainage of care” towards industrialized countries, as an “importation of care and love from poor countries to richer ones” (Hochschild 2002, 17). Moreover, it influences the kind of development seen in poor countries: there are, in fact, countries whose “development” strategy consists in facilitating the emigration of women to wealthy countries and regions: the Philippines, for instance, relies on remittances from the domestic workers it sends abroad. This indebted state needs to send its women out to do carework, leaving their own offspring behind in the care of either their families or other poor women.<sup>5</sup>

Let us now apply the four Ds scheme to the relation between economy and policy.

Capitalist societies *divide* the economy from policy; it then constitutes their economies as *dependent* (also) on politics (and territorial states) in order to operate. But because capital recognizes only monetized forms of value, it free rides on politics and *disavows* its cost and importance. Geared to endless

<sup>5</sup> In 1974 labor export was first institutionalized by the Philippine government as a developmental policy. On women migrant workers see: [https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1037003/1930\\_1466505623\\_filipino-women-migrant-workers-factsheet.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1037003/1930_1466505623_filipino-women-migrant-workers-factsheet.pdf)

accumulation, the capitalist economy consumes and *destabilizes* the political powers (and territorial states) that it itself needs.<sup>6</sup>

Neoliberalism tends to undermine the international system of territorial states and to weaken them despite representing an indispensable precondition for the accumulation of capital. Capitalism, in fact, relies on public powers to establish and enforce its constitutive norms.<sup>7</sup> First of all, “transnational space in which capital operates must be constructed politically” (Fraser 2018, 102); secondly, territorial states are “the paradigmatic agencies that afford or deny protection”; thirdly, they perform the work of political subjectivation: “they codify the status hierarchies that distinguish citizens from subjects, nationals from aliens, entitled workers from dependent scroungers [...]” (*ibid.*, 57). And precisely these, according to Fraser, are essential distinctions for accumulation given that “they construct and mark off the groups subject to brute expropriation from those destined for ‘mere’ exploitation” (*ibid.*).

The neoliberal economy acts as if there were no boundaries but, Fraser emphasizes, “borders do exist” (*ibid.*, 102). Neoliberals portray a world based on free markets as one where anyone and anything can go anywhere and everywhere, and where employers and workers encounter each other as free legal subjects, with equal rights to make contracts. But this harmonious picture, Fraser holds, is often very far from reality. Neoliberalism and the cultural

<sup>6</sup> See Fraser 2018.

<sup>7</sup> After all, Fraser points out, “a market economy is inconceivable in the absence of a legal framework that underpins private enterprise and market exchange. Its front-story depends crucially on public powers to guarantee property rights, enforce contracts, adjudicate disputes, quell anti-capitalist rebellions, and maintain, in the language of the US Constitution, ‘the full faith and credit’ of the money supply” (Fraser-Jaeggi 2018, 52).

cosmopolitanism associated with the new globalizing economy “has fueled a nostalgic reaction towards old fashioned family values and life worlds” (*ibid.*, 243); politicians in labor-importing countries, aware of popular hostility to immigration “have responded with a rhetoric of national sovereignty and control”. This interplay between market forces demanding freedom of movement and political forces demanding control has created, as Castle pointed out, a global labor market differentiated, not only according to ‘human capital’ (possession of education, training, etc.), but also according to gender, race, ethnicity, origins and legal status. Therefore, also Fraser would conclude, as Castle does, that the cosmopolitan dream of free mobility in a competitive global labor market usually linked to “the idea of cultural openness and growing acceptance of diversity” is far from the experience of most migrant workers.<sup>8</sup>

Fraser holds that another division typical of capitalism is the division between *exploitation* and *expropriation*. The four Ds scheme can also be applied here, if only partially: i.e. capitalist societies *divide* exploitation from expropriation; then they constitute their economies as *dependent* (also) on expropriation in order to operate. As Fraser maintains, expropriation has always been entwined with exploitation in capitalist society: “the racialized subjection of those whom capital expropriates (‘the others’) is a hidden condition of possibility for the freedom of those whom it only exploits (‘the workers’)”.<sup>9</sup> While there was

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Castles 2012, 1850.

<sup>9</sup> Fraser distinguishes exploitation and expropriation in two respects, economic and political: in exploitation, “capital assumes the costs of replenishing the labor it employs in production, whereas in expropriation it does not.” Moreover, “the exploited workers are free individuals and rights-bearing citizens with access to state protection, whereas expropriated subjects are dependent beings, who cannot call on public power to shield them from predation and violence” (Fraser-Jaeggi 2018, 130).

once a clear separation between the exploited who lived at the “core” and the expropriated who lived in the “periphery” of the world, as a result of migrations, the expropriated have been introduced into our societies as migrants necessary to the capitalist system. In this case, accumulation leads to consuming not so much the expropriated as the *very* separation between the exploited and expropriated, reducing the rights and social protection of the former without benefiting the latter: in financialized capitalism, on the one hand, “expropriation is becoming universalized, afflicting not only its traditional subjects but also those who were previously shielded by their status as citizen-workers [...]” (Fraser 2018, 132); on the other hand, there is a continuum between the forcibly expropriated and the “merely” exploited: as Fraser affirms “at one end lies a growing mass of defenseless expropriable subjects; at the other, the dwindling ranks of protected exploited citizen-workers; and in the middle sits a new hybrid figure, formally free and acutely vulnerable: the expropriable-and-exploitable citizen-worker.” Not surprisingly, the expropriation/exploitation continuum remains racialized, “with people of color (and migrants) still disproportionately represented at the expropriative end” (133).

### **Concluding remarks**

Fraser’s view of capitalism as an institutionalized social order based on some structural and institutional divisions, offers three main advantages. First of all, it allows us to read migration within a unified framework. The migration crisis derives from the contradictions and the crises that inhabit the four structural separations which are characteristic of capitalism. Ultimately the very cause of the *current* migration crisis is neoliberal capitalism. In

this framework, the migration crisis is interpreted as a systemic crisis, not just as the result of one or more push/pull factors (such as individual choices, social economic and cultural policies, distributive inequalities, wars, climate changes, the presence of social networks, etc.). Second, it allows us to analyze and understand migration as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon (ecological, political, economic) and to treat it not simply in ethical terms. Third, it allows us to take the concerns of natives seriously. As mentioned above, Fraser explains that the separation – both geographic and demographic – between exploitation and expropriation which was once clearly separated the one from the other, has more recently become blurred: today, more and more free workers “who formerly enjoyed the status of being ‘only’ exploited have found themselves increasingly subject to expropriation” (Fraser-Jaeggi 2018, 127). In this condition citizens feel vulnerable and seek protection.

I would like to dwell on this last point. As we have seen, the effect of crisis tendencies is to incite *class struggles* at the point of production and *boundary struggles* over the separations of society, polity, and nature from the economy, to produce, once they succeed in converging, a new counter-hegemony. Fraser is optimistic that today there is room for “the construction of a counter-hegemonic bloc around the project of a *progressive populism*” (*ibid.*, 258). *Progressive populism* should combine in a single project “an egalitarian, pro-working-class distributive program with an inclusive, nonhierarchical vision of a just recognition order” – or as she summarizes it “emancipation plus social protection” (*ibid.*, 213). In other words, *progressive populism* should fulfill two objectives: to create a united working class and to guarantee emancipation plus social protection.

However, the goal of creating a united working class (*ibid.*, 258), of uniting the exploited and the expropriated in order to create a

counter-hegemonic block against neoliberal/financialized capitalism (*ibid.*, 265), does not seem to be easily achievable. *Progressive populism* (or better, a political party capable of adopting such a program) should be capable of uniting the traditional industrial working class with those who “perform domestic, agricultural, and service labor – paid and unpaid, in private firms and private homes, in the public sector and civil society – activities in which women, immigrants, and people of color are heavily represented” (*ibid.*, 217). Yet it seems unlikely that it could achieve this objective. As Castles (2010) pointed out, indigenous workers fear that migrants – “an unemployed reserve army of workers” – will take away the jobs of local labor, and that they will be used by the employers to keep down wages and weaken the power of strikes; for this reason they regard them “not as class comrades, but as alien intruders who pose an economic and social threat”.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, by making immigrants the causes for the insecurity and inadequate conditions they live in (which depend on the capitalist system), workers’ attention is diverted from the real causes of their condition. The presence of immigrant workers contributes to the lack of class consciousness among large sections of the working class also in another way: “the existence of a new lower level of immigrants changes the worker’s perception of his own position in society” (Castles 2010, 35). Many workers see themselves as belonging to an intermediate level, superior to the unskilled immigrant workers and “do not perceive that they share a common class position and class interests with immigrant workers” (*ibid.*, 34). These do not seem to be favorable conditions for the development of class consciousness: in addition, the working class of contemporary societies is divided by identity conflicts between indigenous workers and migrants. Therefore, even the possibility of creating class solidarity appears to be lacking

<sup>10</sup> Castles and Kosack 2010, 34.

let alone the awareness of having a common enemy, namely predatory neoliberal capitalism (assuming that this awareness would be sufficient to fuel class or boundary struggles and to identify which struggles are emancipatory and which are not).

No less problematic seems the possibility of guaranteeing “emancipation plus social protection.” More specifically, and as Jaeggi asks, what form should social protection in a globalized world take? “Who should be protected or who belongs in the ‘circle’ of people who are counted under social protection?” (Fraser-Jaeggi 2018, 255). In other words, would it be acceptable and to what extent for *progressive populism* to prioritize “emancipation plus social protection” for its own citizens and residents?

Fraser argues that social protection cannot be envisioned only at a national level, and that there is a need for some form of global governance (*ibid.*, 256). However, what this might imply from a political-institutional point of view, remains unclear. In fact, on the one hand she says that states are still active protagonists,<sup>11</sup> that they should not be liquidated, not only because of some problems needing to be solved locally, but also because democracy needs them (*ibid.*, 224). On the other hand, she grounds the possibility of local governance (and social protection) on the realization of a large-scale governance which will be just, democratic, sustainable.

Finally, it would be interesting to understand whether mass migration can play a role in the struggle against the capitalist system and whether claims and struggles around migration can somehow be emancipatory struggles. From this point of view then, is the

<sup>11</sup> “Cultural cosmopolitanism associated with the new globalizing economy has fueled a nostalgic reaction towards old fashioned family values and lifeworlds” (Fraser-Jaeggi, 2018, 243). The sense of cultural superiority of cosmopolitans has imbued “progressive neoliberalism with a superior ‘tone’” (*ibid.*, 250) which has generated *resentiment* in the working class.

migration crisis part of the process of transformation of capitalist structures and institutions in the host societies as well as globally? As a certain level of cultural, civic, and social integration seems to be necessary for the creation of a social bloc, and a sense of commonality between natives and migrant working class is required for both to fight capitalism, which model of integration of migrants would it be preferable to implement? (Fraser does not seem to appreciate the multiculturalist model defended by progressive neoliberalism). Finally, which criteria does her theory offer for assessing the effects of migration on national identity, social cohesion, and democracy?

As we have seen, Fraser holds that contradictions can give rise to crisis which in turn gives rise to boundary struggles and such struggles might possibly turn into emancipative struggles against capitalism. She also offers some criteria for discerning emancipatory from non-emancipatory claims about structural transformation (about capitalist divisions and boundaries), that is – nondomination, functional sustainability, democracy (*ibid.*, 219).<sup>12</sup> Which claims, then, relating to current migrations satisfy these criteria? For example, are the claims for open borders or for *ius soli* citizenship, emancipatory? In other words, are these claims and the struggles regarding them, and above all *their possible effects* on democratic societies, anti-capitalist? If not, should these claims and struggles be pursued anyway?

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<sup>12</sup> According to Fraser the three criteria should be used together, as a toolkit. “To be acceptable”, she says, “a proposed structural transformation must satisfy all three” (Fraser -Jaeggi 2018, 219).

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