



IMMEDIACY, MEDIATION,  
AND FEMINIST LOGISTICS  
RETHINKING THE QUESTION  
OF “FUNCTIONAL SUSTAINABILITY”

BY

TANIA RISPOLI

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# Immediacy, Mediation, and Feminist Logistics Rethinking the Question of “Functional Sustainability”

Tania Rispoli

## Introduction

In an article published in 2016 by *The New Left Review* Nancy Fraser denounced the crisis of care produced by capitalism: in order to accumulate value, capitalism destroys the forces of labor and the resources of nature that are necessary to its own reproduction (Fraser 2017, 22). At that time, Fraser’s article followed and reshaped a particularly lively debate in the field of feminist studies on the “care deficit” that our societies are affected by. According to the conventional definition given by Fisher and Tronto, care is defined as all the activities “we do to maintain, continue and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which

we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Tronto 2013, 19). As reported first by Fisher and Tronto, and then in *Caring Democracy* by Tronto, these interlinked activities underwent a revolution during the last century, since they were restructured through altered arrangements. Housework, childcare, eldercare, as well as our relationship with nature and objects, are currently mediated by the market and organized following patterns that are “often unequal, particularistic, and pluralistic” (Fraser 2017, 10). While for Tronto this inability to take care within our society is strictly related to the arrangements of our policies, such that the “care deficit” is also a “democratic deficit,” for Fraser it is necessary to look at the “systemic roots” of the “crisis of care” (*ibid.*, 22). Not only, according to Fraser, the “strand” of the “general” crises of care “encompasses other strands – economic, ecological, and political, all of which intersect with and exacerbate one another” but also “every form of capitalist society harbors a deep-seated social-reproductive ‘crisis tendency’ or ‘contradiction’” (*ibid.*, 21). In order to accumulate profits, capital needs human and nonhuman resources, but at the same time it “tends to destabilize” their system of social reproduction. This destabilization often takes the form of exploitation, if not of destruction through extraction, exhaustion, and pollution. The emphasis that Fraser puts on the Marxist-Feminist concept of social reproduction, while re-reading it through a neo-Polanyian framework, precisely aims to connect economic and social spheres, showing that the crisis of social reproduction is, in reality, a necessary crisis of “capitalism as such” (*ibid.*, 22-24).

The crisis of care has become even more patent after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic that has shown all the flaws and the untenability of the capitalist system. The deadlock denounced by Fraser in 2016 with explicit reference to the financial economic crisis of 2008 was just the beginning of a new phase that the pandemic has recently intensified. The effects of extraction and

the production of waste on ecosystems and the climate that are responsible for the zoonotic “spillover” originating the virus (Quammen 2012); and the differentiated access to specific universal rights such as education and healthcare, together with high rates of unemployment; race, gender, and class divisions of labor are only some of the effects through which capitalism “eats its own tail” (Fraser 2017, 24). In this sense, in order to reproduce itself capitalism destroys the natural and social forces which are necessary for its own sustainment. The idea of the crisis of capitalism as a crisis of social reproduction has recently been further explored by several scholars, activist and intellectuals, to explain the impact of COVID-19 on the economic system and social life. For Sandro Mezzadra, for example, the pandemic “has hit a point of no return in the development of global capitalism, since it shows “the fragility and the precarity” of our lives in common and our systems of “care” (Mezzadra 2020). Montanelli, Rigo, and Tola, emphasize, instead, the interdependence of the crisis of social reproduction, with the ecological crisis and with migration (Non Una di Meno 2020). At various levels of associated and common life, the outbreak of the pandemic revealed pre-existing and pre-determinate crises of the capitalist system in relation to its means of reproduction through nature, human, and even nonhuman forces and entities across different borders.

The crisis of social reproduction became evident during the pandemic in many ways: from the inability and inadequacy of healthcare systems to cope with an event of this type, to the contradictions of unpaid and unrecognized work within the family unit – delegated to women most of the time. For the first time, through the rhetoric around the importance of “essential workers” – such as nurses, doctors, hospital staff, workers of the food and logistics chain – the infrastructure of care that sustain our system became visible. More generally, the lockdown has exposed the crisis of an immense sector of reproductive capitalism, often highly

developed and specialized, as is the case of hospitals, schools and universities which, together with large retailers, are the major employers at least in the Global North. On a more theoretical level, it can be argued that social reproduction (and its crisis) develops on multiscale levels, ranging from the most immediate proximity necessary in the care of a child, an elderly person or a sick person to more distant and institutionalized forms, as occurs in healthcare and education systems, which become places for the reproduction of bodies and minds, across infrastructures that regulate the flows and exchanges of different types of workers through the complex mechanisms of global value chains.

Framed in the debate around the crisis of social reproduction as a constitutive effect of capitalist accumulation and development, my article aims to discuss what options are at stake in “contesting capitalism,” following the expression used by Fraser and Jaeggi in *Capitalism. A Conversation*, within the crisis of the current system of production and social reproduction (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 115). More in general, it focuses on the ways in which some political theorists, feminist scholars and activists, and eventually media and platform theorists have re-thought forms of social and political organization in contesting capitalism in the last decades, referring to existing movements, parties, or political transitory experiences that actually are contesting capitalism. The ultimate goal of this article is to envision the necessity of building new social and political infrastructures that are able to face the complexity of contemporary capitalism, while at the same time to assemble a common feminist logistics of care. In particular, logistics is a crucial term for understanding the functioning of contemporary capitalism and the interconnected operations of production, distribution, and circulation of “flows of materials, information, and people” (Chua et al. 2018, 617-619). The idea of subverting terms and concepts that are crucial to the shape and the development of current capitalism comes from the observation of

the importance of the processes of digitalization and platformization in our systems of production and reproduction, as well as from Autonomist methodology, according to which all the instruments of capital – technologies and infrastructures included – could be seen not only as means for reproducing capital accumulation through destruction, but also for their “revolutionary” potentiality, as expressions of living forces of labor (Tronti 2019, 73-80; Hardt and Negri 2017, 107-123).

According to Fraser – as discussed with Jaeggi in the fourth chapter of *Capitalism. A Conversation* – one fundamental strategy in contesting capitalism is to produce “boundary struggles” that take place “at the points where production meets reproduction, economy meets polity, and human society meets non-human nature” (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 167). In Fraser’s terms, boundary struggles occur in the intermediate spaces between production and reproduction, economic and political spheres, and natural and social domains, and should meet three “normative” criteria in order to become concretely “emancipatory”. The first is that a boundary struggle should tend to “nondomination”, so that the struggle itself aims at creating more equal societal and political arrangements. The second is its “functional sustainability”: since a social movement cannot sustain itself, it should be institutionalized. Finally, the third normative criteria are that those struggles should be based on an internal democratic principle. The specific aim of my article is to focus on the question of “functional sustainability” and to unpack its meanings and possible practices in order to see not only how the current ways of contesting capitalism are conceived but also to explore the issue of how they might be enhanced in order to be actually sustainable. In exploring this question, my goal is to avoid a two-staged perspective, that is based on the idea that first struggles happen and then they will be institutionalized in the traditional mediated forms of unions and parties. Fraser’s emphasis on the boundary between the social and

the political dimension precisely goes in the direction of exploring the border between grassroots struggles produced by social movements and their possible interaction with institutionalized structures. In this article, I label the first theoretical perspective – oriented towards social movements, or to localized eruptions and single events of struggles – as immediacy, whereas the second that emphasizes parliamentary or bargaining procedures as mediation. Compared to these two strands of analyses, Fraser’s neo-Polanyian elaboration addresses the dichotomy between political conflicts mediated by the state and those based on the assumption that their immediate expression could constitute an exit from the capitalist system.

Focusing primarily on the cycle of struggles that took place between 2011 and 2015, and with some references to the years just after 2000, Fraser examines virtues and vices of movements such as Occupy Wall Street (OWS), de-growth, decolonial and indigenous movements. In her terms, one of the problems of movements such as Occupy is that they are not sustainable “over time” (*ibid.* 180). In fact, she adds, they often “erupt in spectacular ways, occupy public space, capture public attention, and then suddenly disappear without leaving trace” (*ibid.*, 182). On the other hand, the main issues of some de-growth, decolonial and indigenous movements appear to be the insufficient emphasis in addressing capitalism and its systems of economic and cultural production, advocating for a de-growth or for a “cultural pluralism” without changing the current system of production. However, for Fraser, social movements that were able to couple tumults in the streets with parliamentary actions, such as the movement of Indignados that eventually organized itself into a structured party, Podemos, succeeded in producing some forms of continuity and durability. The same could be said for “Sanders, Corbyn, Mélenchon, the early SYRIZA” that expanded the set of possibility in contesting capitalism, and for feminist and black



movements that have progressively included an extended “working class” (*ibid.*, 221). Fraser’s underlying proposal is that it is necessary to imagine a wide “counterhegemonic bloc” able to hold together “a politics of distribution” with a “substantially inclusive, class sensitive politics of recognition” (*ibid.*, 223). The idea of the production of a counterhegemonic bloc, very often promoted by Gramscian scholars and thinkers, combines grassroots activities of social movements with the constituency of a party. While the Spanish Podemos and the Greek SYRIZA created two parties that emerged directly from the action of social movements, Corbyn and Sanders-AOC acted as a movement within the Labour Party and the Democratic Party, respectively – Corbyn being oriented toward a left-wing radical model, and Sanders-AOC toward a social democratic one, and now toward strongly anti-racist and feminist politics. Expanding on Fraser’s problem of “functional sustainability” – with the awareness that the political framework is already partially divergent from that of 2018 when Fraser’s book was published – and trying to avoid a two staged perspective – first come movements, then they will be institutionalized as parties –, and specifically looking at the current arrangements of contemporary capitalism, my speculative question is whether it would be possible to produce institutions, which are always forms of mediation, directly within struggles that are often unmediated.

## I

### **The question of “functional sustainability” in contemporary critical political theory**

With the idea of the “functional sustainability” of “boundary struggles,” Fraser sets forth a brilliant response to the two

dominant approaches in critical political theory that either argue that “contesting capitalism” means to create new social democratic parties able to enter the parliamentary battlefield, or to exit capitalism, creating alternatives micro-communities. In doing this, Fraser is not alone, but joined by other scholars and activists who have shown the relation between conflict and institutions. For example, in their last major book *Assembly*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, posing the challenge of the continuity of social movements, call for the necessity of the invention of “nonsovereign institutions” grounded in overcoming traditional systems of representation – which have often failed to mediate social instances within political procedures through reformism (Hardt and Negri 2017, 38). They see the movements as based on a “leaderless” model of organization, in which the problem of leadership becomes relegated to a tactical and temporary role, instead of a strategical one (*ibid.*, 22). Looking at the sphere of “social production” in which multitude expresses its power of “cooperation” and “entrepreneurship” within the joint productive/reproductive spheres, they propose the “assembly” as the political center of making institutions (*ibid.*, 143-146). Since in late capitalism the “superposition” between the social realm and the political sphere is accomplished, the three strategies of “exodus” from capitalism, of “antagonistic reformism” through new parties that act as movements and that of “hegemonic strategy” can be combined to organize a “new form of governance” of “the common” (*ibid.*, 274-280). Assemblies are the visible space in which a multiplicity of subjects can “take the word” and, at the same time, the complex results of “machinic” assemblages of various social, natural and technological subjectivities – women, migrants, workers, indigenous people, and even humans, animals, and machines (*ibid.*, 120).

Also, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson in *The Politics of Operations. Excavating Contemporary Capitalism* reflect on the

processes of disintermediation produced by the combined activities of operations of capital of extraction, finance, and logistics, and their legal and governmental tools and procedures, which nevertheless include some nation-state interventions. In this context, their proposal is that movements, in order to last and effectively change the status quo, have to produce “counterpowers” that are radically autonomous from the state but at the same time able to mediate and “reckon” with the state (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019, 243). In their terms, counterpowers are also forms of coalitions that connect and translate local and transnational struggles beyond nation-states.

This proposal of producing coalitions, as an “identity of differences”, while claiming for a strategical demand was also posited by Kathi Weeks in her “defense” of UBI (Weeks 2020, 585). Analyzing a speech of the activist and Black feminist theorist, Berenice Johnson Reagon, Weeks explains the dangers and the fatigue of practicing coalitional politics: coalitions, as for Reagon, are not “safe spaces” such as one’s own home, but they take place “in the streets” (*ibid.*, 586). This unsettling result of experiencing the connection with different subjectivities (or political takes; gender, race and class differences) is the very locus of any autonomous and feminist politics. The same demand for basic income involves a multiplicity of local, national, and (perhaps even) supernational entities – such as in the case of the struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe, since several social movements are reclaiming basic income and welfare redistribution to be funded by the European Union.

In conclusion, all these scholars and activists focus on the question of political forms of grassroots organization, while posing what Fraser calls the problem of “functional sustainability.” A social movement is functionally sustainable when it can last over time directly producing infrastructures and/or mediating with

(often local and state) institutions – such as the long wave of Black Lives Matter has done from 2014 to today – when it can produce a long term strategy, such as the demand for basic income as a form of generalized distribution of accumulated wealth (often in the hands of a few), and when it leaves the “safe space” to enter the complex and multifarious world of the streets with their contradictory directions and intertwined spatiality.

## II

### **Theories of mediation and theories of immediacy**

In the last decades, the publication by Verso of several books by Nicos Poulantzas, contributed to the development of a theory of state mediation in the context of neoliberalism. Poulantzas was mainly active as a philosopher between 1968 and 1979 and his reflections on the political, the dynamics of social classes and the state have influenced the European Left and communist debate at that time. Working with the conceptual tools borrowed from Vladimir Lenin, Louis Althusser, and Antonio Gramsci, Poulantzas claimed that Marxian theory, in its effort to analyze economic dynamics, had left a reflection on the state underdeveloped. According to Stuart Hall’s eulogy for Poulantzas’ death (now published in Verso’s edition of 2001 of *State, Power, Socialism*), Poulantzas deciphered the state firstly by recognizing, in *Political Classes and Social Power*, the centrality of the state “in organizing the power bloc and disorganizing the dominant classes” (Hall 2001, ix) and then identifying it as the “capitalist state” permanently in crisis, while questioning the problem of a transition to a socialist state (*ibid.*, 11). According to Poulantzas, the state is not absolutely but relatively autonomous from the social sphere, and this has consequences for the way we conceive the

development of different forms of state, which follow the different stages of capitalism, and of the relationship between class struggles and the state itself (Hall 1979, 198-199). More specifically, “the establishment of the State’s policy must be seen as the result of the class contradictions inscribed in the very structure of State”, so that “class contradictions” are always embedded in the state’s “material framework” and in “its organization” (Poulantzas 2001, 138). This vision of the state also informs the theorization of the relationship between “state” and “popular struggles”: in fact, while “state apparatuses” and “state relative autonomy” are often deployed to reaffirm the power of the dominant class, they also contain the conflict “between [...] the bloc” of the dominant classes and of “the dominated classes” (*ibid.*, 140). From this point of view, even if “popular struggles” go beyond the state, “insofar as they are genuinely political, they are not really external to the State” (*ibid.*, 141). They are both the expressions of “direct forms of contradiction” between the two classes, but are also “present in a mediated form through the impact of popular struggle on contradictions among the dominant classes” (*ibid.*, 141). Poulantzas’s proposal, therefore, is that popular struggle beyond the state should be accompanied and implemented with the entrance of those struggles into the parliamentary and representative arena.

Furthermore, several re-interpretations of Gramsci’s insights, such as that of Ernesto Laclau, have gone in the same direction, often emphasizing the necessity of a populist moment within the political process, an idea that implies the possibility of a group of individuals being organized as a “people” and the necessity of building a hegemonic and expansive action of intervention (Laclau 2005, 137). The idea of a Left populism, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, has gained some interest in Europe, especially with the rise of popularity of Podemos. In fact, the proposal of building a hegemonic bloc has recently been voiced in

the context of the rise of Podemos, for example in a conversation between the philosopher Chantal Mouffe (long term intellectual partner of Laclau himself and co-author of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*) and Íñigo Errejón Galván, one of the movement's main representatives until 2019, together with Pablo Iglesias of the Podemos party, now contained in the book *Podemos: In the Name of the People*. The Podemos party arose following the 15 May Movement of the *acampadas* at Puerta del Sol in Madrid and, according to Íñigo Errejón and Chantal Mouffe, the construction of the party guaranteed the continuity of the social movement. As argued by Chantal Mouffe:

I believe that 15M would have come to nothing without Podemos, which finally managed to capitalize on all that energy. [...] That is the reason why it's very important to channel these protests movements in a direction that seeks to engage with existing institutions in order to transform them. The explosion of protest is a first step, but without a second moment of channeling a movement can acquire a direction other than progressive (Errejón and Mouffe 2016, 70-71).

Here we see the logic of the two stages at play: first a social movement arises and takes the streets, and then it organizes in the more stable and functional form of the party. Even if, as acknowledged soon after by Errejón, there is not a direct correspondence between the 15M movement and Podemos (since the movement was more various and complex than the party itself), we can observe here in action an idea of a movement that produces a “climate cultural change” that will then be substituted or integrated by the political moment of a system of representation (*ibid.*, 108-117). While Errejón and Mouffe's proposal remains interestingly formulated and Podemos was and is a quite successful

party, one of the questions of my argument is if social movements that may also immediately be expression of “the political” are possible. One of the problems of the theories of mediation, in fact, seems to be a reliance on the idea that politics should be mainly organized through the party system or the system of representation, while these structures are increasingly in crisis both because they fail the needs and aspiration of the voters and because of the influence of certain means of communication such as social media for the development of the public discourse. Moreover, they often take the nation-State and “the people” – conceived as an actual or potential unity of different citizens, if considered according to their race, class, or gender – as a limited unit of comparison to think of “the political”.

On the contrary, the critical theories of immediacy consider the party and the representation system as insufficient means to contrast the effects of capital on society. Some instances of those theories can be found in the claims for communization (from the group and the journal “Théorie Communiste” to “Endnotes”) and in the theorizations of the “anarchist” groups The Invisible Committee. Looking at this last example, we might notice that their refusal of the capitalist system goes hand in hand with an idea of organization based on communities. For example, in their first book, *The Coming Insurrection* (2007 in the French edition), The Invisible Committee, observing the riots that took place in France and Greece in 2005 and 2007, argues that, despite all the geographical differences and political specificities, the various “revolutionary movements” do have the power of spreading “by resonance”. Focusing on the global connection of the multiple insurrections, the collective aims at a model of organization that is radically against and beyond the state, and able to put at the center of political practice the ability of “sharing” and building “bonds”, both “materially” and “spiritually” (The Invisible Committee 2009, 12 and 14). In each event of insurrection, there is a production of

the commune, intended as a “unity of partisan reality” in which the participants built “ties” directed toward the “self-sufficiency” and to the organization of “material and moral survival” (*ibid.*, 103 and 102). The circulation of knowledge and actions makes the various communes connected to each other without any need of affirming a “hegemony” (*ibid.*, 124).

This fundamental idea of avoiding any mediation with the state and the traditional institutions of unions and parties is further developed by The Invisible Committee in their next book, *To Our Friends*, published in France in 2014 (The Invisible Committee 2015). In this work, the collective specifies that the insurrections are not a claim for democracy, that they rely on the power of blockading capitalist logistics, and that they should refuse “technology” while fostering the “techniques”. In their terms, “the miracle of insurrection” is “at the same time that it dissolves democracy as a problem” and “it speaks immediately of a beyond-democracy”. While the model of the “general assembly” does not fulfill the need of a crowd that expresses anger and rage, and it repeats the form of “foundation” of the constitutive power, the insurrection affirms a destituent power, able “to take away its legitimacy, compel it to recognize its arbitrariness, reveal its contingent dimension” (*ibid.*, 74 and 75). The idea is to create a self-organizing process, moving “from the outside” of state and democracy and moving “on a different plane” of communal experience (*ibid.*, 78). In addition, the idea that contemporary power does not affirm itself through “institutions” but “resides in the infrastructure of this world” and “has become environmental itself” shows the necessity of organizing the insurrection around actions that block logistics (*ibid.*, 82 and 83). Finally, this power is developed through the surveillance system of the Internet and of the various forms of profiling enabled by platforms, which should be refused in their systematization within “technology” while counteracted through different hackers’ “techniques of sabotage”



– beyond a logic of “technophilia” and “technophobia”. On the basis of these proposals, The Invisible Committee delineates the future commune produced within the episodes of insurrection. In their terms, “what constitutes the commune is the mutual oath sworn by the inhabitants of a city, a town, or a rural area to stand together as a body” (*ibid.*, 199). The commune is the construction of “qualitative” bonds aimed to “conspiracy.” It is notably a way of inhabiting “the world” within a specific and material “territory” that “offers [...] a dwelling place and a shelter” (*ibid.*, 201 and 202). Moreover, the commune put at the center the “res communes”, both natural and infrastructural, that are not appropriable and of which “one can only make use” (*ibid.*, 206). However, contrarily to Elinor Ostrom, and Hardt and Negri, The Invisible Committee does not think that commons could be democratically managed without rehearsing liberal principles of democracy; they should, instead be immediately shared. More extensively:

Contemporary communes don’t claim any access to, or aspire to the management of any “commons”. They immediately organize a shared form of life – that is, they develop a common relationship with what cannot be appropriated, beginning with the world (*ibid.*, 208).

Here we clearly find at play a theory of immediacy, according to which to contrast capitalist systems it would be sufficient to produce several immediate destituent actions (of blockade or of riots) while building a parallel communal reality of self-organized groups of people in the forms of “integral co-ops” that would deal with every aspect of life (*ibid.*, 209). This fractional interpretation of the inspiring and multifarious social movements that erupted during the last twenty years – from the Zapatistas during the turn of the century to Gezi Park in 2013, from Greek social movements

against austerity from 2010 to 2012 to Spanish Indignados in 2013 during the same years – encounters one impasse when confronted with the question of the “functional sustainability” and the potential global connections of those social movements. In fact, for The Invisible Committee the commune faces what in their view is a “paradox”, since on the one side it should be grounded on a specific territory in order to have a “local” consistency, but at the same time “it must detach itself from the groundedness that constitutes it” in order to establish links between different communes around the world (*ibid.*, 205). As for the issue of “functional sustainability,” The Invisible Committee does not pose the question of the possible continuity of experiences of struggles, since the immediacy of the commune is in its self-sufficiency already a realization of the form of contesting capitalism. While the reality of the last years showed that many struggle events fade away or are beaten by repression when they do not build an organizational continuity, several other social movements have grown (and sometimes have obtained some local victories) when they are transversally organized – not only in one territory or community – such as Black Lives Matter in the USA and beyond.

As we have seen, the main limit of the theories of mediation is their reliance on a two-staged perspective, according to which social movements have to be supplemented by the formalized structures of representation. These theories only partially analyze the profound crisis of the party form, emerged at the beginning of the 70s with neoliberalism, and they assume the nation-state as the main entity on which to cast their proposals. On the contrary, the main problem that arises with the theories of immediacy is that, in praising an ephemeral and contingent event of struggle, they do not put into question the problem of “functional sustainability” of those experiences of struggle. Moreover, both the theorists of mediation and the theorists of immediacy see the political as separated from the social domain. For the former, it would be

necessary to build a truly political (and party) action, whereas for the latter, it is enough to affirm the social reality, conceiving it as a form of immediate and collective life. Finally, they both risk misreading the capitalist system. According to the theories of mediation, capitalism could be somehow reformed through parliamentary and “popular” actions, while for the theories of immediacy capitalism should be destituted by impressive actions and by the creation of communes outside of its grids and infrastructures. In other terms: for the first group the basic unity of analysis for their critical political theory is the nation-state, while for the second group it is the local dwelling in a specific territory. My argument is that, analyzing the actual functioning of the capitalist system, we can concretely observe how infrastructures play out and how they organize the blurred boundaries of the economy and politics. In fact, today’s production is organized well beyond the borders of a single nation or the micro-community but connects the entire world across complex and multi-scale spaces. This transformation of capitalism also produces a way of mediating the social and the political dimensions. The question then becomes whether contemporary social movements might reuse or radically transform the potentiality of this wide capacity of connection and logistics to shape a society oriented to social justice and to the common.

### III

#### **The problem of mediation in platform capitalism**

The transition from Fordism to post-Fordism and the effects of globalization on the economy and politics transformed the way through which capitalism has reorganized the system of its own reproduction. In *The Crisis of Care*, Fraser analyzes this transition

showing the shift in “regimes” from a “nineteenth-century regime of liberal competitive capitalism” to a stage of “state managed capitalism” in the twentieth century, to “globalizing financialized capitalism” (Fraser 2017, 25). For each of these regimes Fraser pinpoints the transformations occurred in the sphere of social reproduction, especially in the family models, often in connection with colonialism and exploitation of “peripheries” (Fraser 2017, 25-35). More in general, forms of political mediation changed according to the variations in the capitalist ability to intervene in and re-organize space, as we have seen is showed by Mezzadra and Neilson in their last work on the intertwined capitalist operations. Independently from the name attributed to this specific phase of capitalism – “cognitive” or “informational” or “platform” capitalism – a shift in the modes of production towards a service economy, the use of technology and a contradictory mode of relation of capital to space have occurred. These new specific means of accumulating capital through extraction and the new forms of exploitation have produced several effects on the institutions of political mediation, disintermediating their traditional roles. The processes of disintermediation have led to a severe crisis of traditional mass political parties, and in general the institution of mass politics organized in communities, enhancing the tendency of reducing electoral politics to lobbying committees and mass media, as well as haunting the labor movement in the last decades and threatening their ability of unionize. My argument is that one of the problems that contemporary social movements face is the question concerning the possibility to overturn the center of command in the production process in the epoch of the machinical, algorithmic, and logistics control of production through platforms. In other terms, the possibility of producing political mediation or the effectiveness of unmediated actions varies in relation to a model of organization that is increasingly algorithmically self-organized and where the negotiation between

the different links in the chain seems to be self-propelled and self-correcting, with no minimal human center of command. Understanding the shape of contemporary capitalism, could help to redefine the meaning of functional sustainability and to rethink the purpose of forms of mediated and unmediated political actions.

According to Nick Srnicek, platform capitalism is defined by its ability to coordinate “infrastructures” on which “two or more groups interact” (Srnicek 2017, 43). Two laws regulate platform capitalism: platforms are intermediaries between different users or entities; and they are governed by the so-called “network-effect”, so that a single platform increases its value when multiple users or entities use it (Srnicek 2017, 43-48). This process does not lead only to monopolistic positions, cross-subsidization (i.e., Google is free for its users but generates revenue with advertisements) and extreme outsourcing; it also leads to a new form of politics based on predictions, governance, and app regulations. According to Srnicek, one of the major consequences of platform capitalism is its complete lack of profitability, which will likely lead in a near future to forms of “enclosures” and privatizations: the only way to counter-act this outcome is to act on multiple scales, from the municipal scale to the national one and on international levels, given all these different forms of mediation (and especially those created by the states) would have the capacity to contrast the monopolistic tendencies of major corporations (Srnicek 2017, 126-129).

Whereas Srnicek deals with platforms in terms of economic sociology, Benjamin Bratton analyzes them in the framework of media theory and theory of design. For him, technological totality is the “armature of society” and represents an “accidental megastructure” organized as a multi-layered “Stack” (Bratton 2015, 5). The single layers of the Stack (earth, cloud, city, address, interface, user) are not necessarily only computational but made by

technical and biological, material, and virtual components tied one to another in a complex networks and grids of interdependencies. Each of them acts as a self-enclosed but variably connected partial totality. However, if the structure of the reality is designed as such sovereignty itself, traditionally related to concrete spatial coordinates of interactions among states, is modified by the specific “nomos” of the new space of ethereal cloud, a new “Google Grossarum” that regulates the governance of the Stack (Bratton 2015, 34-40). In this framework, platforms’ main feature is their ability to design and organize reality through protocols and programs. As for Srnicek, Bratton’s platforms are defined by their power of concentration, standardization, and regulation. However, according to him, they also produce systematic totalities able to re-program and absorb mistakes, corrections, and alterations (Bratton 2015, 41-46). Interestingly, for Bratton the only way to counter-act the current model of the Stack is the production of another accidental comprehensive and totalized system connecting earth, clouds, cities, addresses, interfaces, and users in a radically diverse mode. The “Black Stack”, as he calls this resistant and alternative “megastructure”, should not only predict different subjects (not citizens anymore but “users”) but new connections between human and nonhuman beings as well, able to inhabit a “post-Anthropocene” era (Bratton 2015, 351-365).

Both Srnicek and Bratton pose the problem of scale and scaling in analyzing platforms: for Srnicek one way to contrast platforms’ power of economic concentration is to rely on multiple levels of mediation, whereas for Bratton a way of exiting the current Stack would be to create another total and comprehensive system, even if on drastically different bases. These two modes of analyzing platforms are grounded in different approaches: the former on a Marxist analysis that aims at exploring capitalist contradictions; the latter on media theory and theory of design, through which reality is conceived as a totalized and enclosed system that is not

necessarily split by a conflictual dialectic among parts. While with Srnicek, I tend to conceive the platform as a re-organization of a mode of production that hides class antagonism, with Bratton I understand how platform designs are not only economic, but juridical and political as well. Platforms are, therefore, not only software interfaces but algorithmic and infrastructural reorganizations of the entire value chain that have a significant effect on political and social processes of mediation.

More specifically, during the last twenty years, technological improvements and transformations of the productive forces have radically reshaped production processes: Big Data, Clouds, the Internet of Things, the use of robotics and the development of AI engendered a technical reorganization of the cycle of capitalist accumulation. This transformation provoked a restructuring of the organizational management-core of the production process: there has been a shift toward an increasingly larger concentration of capitals (fusions of companies and in general an increase of the size of the financial corporations responsible for finding larger investment capitals on the financial markets) without an organizational centralization of the production process, which is rather continuously fragmented and divided throughout the value chain. The production process is now increasingly structured by the algorithmic rationality of the platform that has substituted the entrepreneur in prescribing the business strategies of the various links of the value chain. From a Marxist point of view, with the new central role of platforms we are witnessing a profound reorganization of the relation between the process of capitalist accumulation and its spatial conditions. While capital's drive to accumulate value always had the tendency to become liquid, independent of the material and social resistances that it encounters from below, space and technology, on the other hand, have always constituted a problem but also an opportunity for capitalist exploitation (Harvey 2007, 133-136 and 433-442). On the

one hand, platforms helped to rationalize the processes of production and circulation, minimizing the costs and maximizing the turnover rate; on the other, they facilitated the re-assembly of the value-chain around those hubs where labor costs were the lowest, while at the same time guaranteeing the maximum efficiency in terms of business performances.

In addition, platforms have also intensified the so-called “logistic revolution” that, starting in the 60s, has contributed to the neoliberal turn by minimizing the irrational elements of the supply-chain and fostering circulationist capital. Keller Easterling emphasizes the “governing” processes associated with “infrastructure space” – which is the “medium of information” or “an updating platform” through which the logistics of everyday life is organized. Examining three different cases of “infrastructure space”, such as free zones, broadband mobile in Kenya, and ISO’s protocols, Easterling shows how those spaces are “medium” of “extrastatecraft” that combine the action of the states with governmental and technical interventions across global and local scales (Easterling 2014). Giorgio Grappi, building upon Easterling and other theories, underlines how “logistics redefines sovereignty” through governance and a “politics of corridors” (Grappi 2016, 121-129). Finally, Deborah Cowen shows the violence implicated in the process of logistical re-organization, in which the production of commodities is not only realized “across logistics spaces” but implies an entire new politics of “military” and “civilian” strategies (Cowen 2014, 1-5); at the same time, she also suggests that through activism and struggles it would be possible to explore “the potential of logistics space done differently”, ultimately “queering logistics” (Cowen 2014, 229 and 224).

This set of theories on platforms and logistics offers a range of arguments that demonstrate how the processes of economic mediation increasingly take place in transnational chains, while



political mediation is increasingly fragmented among a series of actors that include states, international bodies, corporations, extra-state zones. Furthermore, through these notions, it is possible to observe how the invisibilization and machinization of the center of command, and the consequential transformation of the organization of the global value chain, pose several problems regarding the political control of the production process. Who decides what to produce, how to produce, and in which quantity to produce? Who decides over the social cooperation? This huge question (here only sketched out) has been one of the issues at stake for feminist and environmentalist movements, as well as at the center of the struggles of workers of logistics at the global level. One of the challenges these movements are facing is what might be the design or the architecture of social cooperation in the age of platform capitalism? What could be a new subversive logistics against the logistics of the production and distribution of resources and power, of extraction, racialization and patriarchy that continue to be at play in the capitalistic process of accumulation?

## IV

### **Toward a theory of a feminist logistics**

The cycle of the economic crisis of 2007 and now the crisis produced by the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted not only the functioning and the crisis of global logistics, but also the essential role of care-work within this functioning. The debate on the reconciliation between healthcare and the protection of production mystifies a crucial problem: care, broadly intended, emerges as a pre-condition for the functioning of production and its distribution chains, as well as for the entire network of social and ecological connections. Care is not only directly reproductive, as previously discussed, but it is also an essential link in the

production cycle within a platform economy in which interconnections have become increasingly crucial. As Fraser argues throughout her temporal sketches of capitalist regimes, social reproduction has always been central to the private form of domestic work for the reproduction and replenishment of the Fordist workforce and it is now central to the complex post-Fordist class composition – even more during a pandemic that undermined productive and reproductive mechanisms and has made evident the defects of the entire system. Thinking about platform capitalism in terms of architecture allows us to keep together abstract procedures of AI and invisible connections in the global value chain, with ecological and social material entities. Finally, questions around social cooperation and control over production and social reproduction might lead us to re-imagine the architecture we all live in as one oriented to care, instead of extraction, exploitation, and inexorable profit.

The dialectic between immediacy and mediation is currently being discussed in the political theory debate as it has been developed lately – in particular during the pandemic. In an interview, Achille Mbembe argues that the “politics of experience” became “the new way of being at home in the world”, a potential answer to technology and detachment produced by neoliberalism that, nevertheless, ends up being “very much in tune with the dominant strictures of neoliberal individualism” (Mbembe 2021). The idea that “mediation is no longer necessary” and the consequent stance that sees “direct, originary experience” as “the new norm” (Mbembe 2019, 215) has often been at the center of some of the claims against the governance of the pandemic enforced through lockdowns, contact tracing apps, vaccine passes – without even considering the debate around vaccine hesitancy, and the question of the relationship with science experts. On the other hand, the idea that mediation should be developed in the form of a “planetary governance” through state action and beyond

has been interestingly developed by Bratton in a framework that considers computing architectures and ecologies but leave aside the social dimension implied in the labor of AI and platforms (Bratton 2021). Nevertheless, both critiques pinpoint in the right direction by emphasizing the importance of elevating ourselves from our personal and direct experience and claiming the necessity of scaling up in order to rethink complex architectures. How to rebuild those architectures and multilayered forms of governance not only from above but also from below? How to re-address, posing once again the question suggested by Nancy Fraser, the question of “functional sustainability” of social and political struggles?

Looking at contemporary social movements, we might observe – as already widely acknowledged by several contemporary critical theorists who have more or less directly addressed the issue of “functional sustainability” – how they are hyper-organized and how they aim to connect themselves within coalitions, which are not only based in local grassroots communities but also in national and transnational networks. Examples of these movements can be found in the long path of Black Lives Matter in the United States and in struggles for the freedom of movement of migrants; as well as in the global feminist and transfeminist and in the ecological and climate justice movements arisen in recent years. Each of these movements were able to fabricate a discourse that is increasingly hegemonic, while at the same time they were able to build multifaceted and effective infrastructures. Among their various claims, these movements demand and create alternative forms of social and ecological reproduction, oriented towards new universalistic welfare guarantees, basic income, and the regeneration of environment and care – from mutual-aid networks to defund the police and essential workers for safety on job places, these claims have been conceived as a way of subverting and rethinking the current “anthropogenic” production process. Nick Dyer-Whiteford and others labeled with an interesting definition

the cycle of pre-pandemic struggles of 2018 and 2019 arisen worldwide, from Chile to Hong Kong, as “riot logistics”. Those protests aimed first to interrupt logistics and circulation; second to put into question living expenses; and finally, to arrange a “counter-logistics” of the struggles themselves, organizing transportation, supplies and communication (Dyer-Whiteford et al. 2020). According to Dyer-Whiteford and others, and in my perspective as well, the idea that social movements organize in the form of logistics provocatively overturns the definition of logistics as the coordination of flows of commodity production, circulation, and consumption. The logistics that in the global circuits of capitalism employs calculative reason and spatial organization to manage the movements of materials, people, and information, becomes a new form of organization aimed at disrupting the uneven flows of production and consumption, contesting, and redesigning its prevalent modes of circulation (see also Rispoli and Tola 2020, 670-671). Differently from Dyer-Whiteford and others, however, I emphasize the idea that this logistics would be feminist, as made explicit by the multiple practices of non-orthodox modes of strikes (feminist strikes against violence and for reproductive rights in Latin America, Southern Europe, and Poland, climate strikes across the globe, strikes of “essential workers” and of migrants everywhere) that, again, on the one hand interrupt capitalist circulation, acting directly on the productive cycle, and on the other have proven able to design a new transnational logistics of the common.

As we have seen, one of the questions of contemporary critical theory is whether contesting capitalism requires the fostering of forms of party and state mediation or if it is enough to focus on the construction of micro-communities that create immediate “bonds” between militants. Thinking with Fraser and many others, it is possible instead to imagine forms of “functional sustainability” that take into consideration the forms of complex and stratified

mediation characteristic of the contemporary economy while avoiding a two-staged perspective, which solves the problem of effectiveness and duration of a social movement with the intervention of a party. In reality, social movements not only organize spaces of autonomy beyond the state but also create forms of mediation with local, sometimes national (and even party-related) bodies, aiming to build a logistics that goes beyond the borders of the nation state. From this point of view, one way to think about the type of action that these movements are putting into play is to develop forms of unmediated mediations that map, challenge, and subvert the infrastructure with which contemporary economy and politics are structured. One way to think about this question has been offered, for example, by Hardt and Negri, with their elaboration of the notion of the “institutions of the common”, which train and educate (“Bildung”) the multitude, as an alternative to innatism or spontaneism, collectively organizing desires and practices into veritable “social institutions” (Hardt and Negri 2009, 195-196). Another analogous way, on the other hand, was that proposed by various feminist media theorists, for example Tiziana Terranova and Luciana Parisi, who, taking into consideration the mediation processes intrinsic to the development of the IT network and of AI, propose the construction of “networks” or “architectures” alternative to the capitalist ones, which are able to turn upside down the current “colonial” political epistemology (Terranova 2004, 153-157; Parisi 2004, 194-201; Parisi 2013, 169-177). In all these cases, forms of mediation are conceived as constitutive of a techno-social-ecological development that includes human and non-human entities. In agreement with these scholars, on the one hand, I think of techno-social-ecological infrastructures as unescapable structures of mediation, and, on the other, I believe in the impossibility of reducing the question of political organization to the current technological and economic formations. The mapping of the

platform economy, computing, and current architectures serves the purpose of creating points of attack, examples of autonomy, and new forms of mediation on a plurality of fields and scales. Judith Butler in *Notes Toward a Theory of Performative Assembly* proposes the idea of building “platforms” intended as both programs and political structures that contest contemporary labor and existential precarity (Butler 2015, 95 and 126). Through platforms or logistics, we can pose the problem of imagining not only what Butler calls an “ethics at a distance” that allows to escape from individualism, but also a politics at a distance able to overcome the limited borders of communities entrenched within a territory and the narrow nation-state (Butler 2015, 104). This idea of creating infrastructures, together with Kathi Weeks’ proposal via Bernice Reagon, to escape from the “safe space” in order to deal with multiple and stratified differences, traces a path that allows us to identify and intensify the infrastructural and logistical construction processes that current social movements are already putting into place. The future of these interconnections will be played out on the terrain of rethinking mechanical and human domains, technological and ecological dimensions, social and political structures.

*Duke University*

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