Reflections

Nancy Fraser

Interviewed by Amrita Chhachhi

Nancy Fraser is Henry A. and Louise Loeb Professor of Philosophy and Politics, Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science, New School for Social Research, New York. Her areas of specialization cover social and political theory, feminist theory, nineteenth and twentieth century European thought, and philosophy of social science. Her early publications include Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory (1990) and Revaluing French Feminism: Critical Essays on Difference, Agency, and Culture (co-edited with Sandra Bartky, 1992), in which she integrated the insights of post-structuralism, critical social theory and feminist theory to develop a new critical socialist feminist theory of late-capitalist political culture, hinging on the theme of ‘the politics of need interpretation’. In Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange (with Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell, 1995), she engaged in an intense debate on feminism and post-modernism, raising issues of epistemology and political commitments, questioning both the post-modernists and their opponents. In her subsequent books Justice Interruptus: Rethinking Key Concepts in a Post-socialist Age (1997), The Radical Imagination: Between Redistribution and Recognition (2003), Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange (co-authored with Axel Honneth, 2003), and Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World (2008a), she has proposed a new theory of justice which should encompass an account of the ‘what’ of justice as multidimensional in social ontology which is simultaneously normatively monist; the view that the ‘who’ of justice is reflexive and substantive and submits to the claim of the ‘all subjected principle’; and finally that the ‘how’ should incorporate simultaneously the dialogical and the institutional to envision new global representative institutions where meta-political claims can be submitted to deliberative democratic decision procedures.

As an engaged public intellectual, Fraser’s commitment to public debate and critical intellectual exchange is reflected in debates she has engaged in with key theorists in many journals and books. Her work has been discussed in Adding Insult to Injury: Nancy Fraser Debates Her Critics, edited by Kevin Olson (2008). She has delivered numerous keynote lectures including
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AC: You have been one of the few philosophers who have maintained Marx’s adage that it is not enough to just interpret the world — the point is to change it. You have evolved a theory of justice based on a zeitdiagnose (diagnosis of the times) — as such, your ideas have developed and changed with the changing times. What diagnosis led you to question the ‘false’ antithesis between the politics of economic redistribution and the politics of cultural/identity recognition where you questioned both Marxism and post-structuralism leading to the formulation of what you term ‘perspectival dualism’ in the 1990s?

NF: I come out of the new left generation, which had a very intense encounter with a kind of unorthodox Marxism. During my high school years in the US, I was part of the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam war movement and was involved in the early phase of second wave feminism and the student movement. This was an atmosphere of enormous ferment in which radical ideas travelled very quickly and I absorbed many ideas that have stayed very relevant and central for me. Above all, the idea of a structural critique of society rather than an approach that simply looks at this abuse and that abuse without looking at the underlying mechanism that connects these things in a systemic way. So, of course I had a profound encounter with Marxism! I, too, was very identified with socialist feminism which was faced with the whole problematic of trying to connect the new issues that feminists were discovering, articulating and analysing with a socialist problematic that was very meaningful for me and still is meaningful for me today. I took it for granted that the kind of feminism that was strong in the US — liberal feminism — was not adequate and that one really did need to situate the struggle against male dominance in the context of a much broader critique of society that included class inequality, racial hierarchy, and so on. As the radical energies of that period began to wane a bit, I, like many other people of my generation, ended up back in the university, in graduate school pursuing a PhD in philosophy.
As the years wore on, I began to sense that the whole structural critique that had been so important in second wave feminism and in other emancipatory movements of that time was being lost. I sensed what I then called a shift in the ‘grammar of political claims making’. People no longer took for granted the whole problematic of a basic unfairness rooted in structures of political economy. That whole perspective was slowly disappearing and instead everyone was talking about identity and difference, essentialism and anti-essentialism. This new language, which we came to call the ‘language of recognition’ following the re-development of Hegelian philosophy by Charles Taylor and others, was not simply a wrong turn. I thought it brought genuine insights and allowed us to name injustices and analyse injustices that were much harder to talk about through the political economy centred lens. So my hope was that this new problematic would come to be integrated with the older one and that we would thereby end up with a much deeper and richer systemic analysis of all forms of injustice in our society and a richer sense of what forms of political practice and political struggle would help to overcome them. In fact that didn’t happen. Rather than having the recognition problematic become integrated with the redistribution problematic — to complicate and deepen and enrich the latter — I think the identity concerns simply pushed the critique of political economy off the table. This was most true in the US and I well appreciate that the shift in other parts of the world was less dramatic. However, the more I read and travelled, I began to feel that I could see versions of this unfortunate development elsewhere. I had not previously used the language of recognition and redistribution, but I found that these were handy terms for trying to point out a problematic shift that involved trading a reductive economism for an equally reductive culturalism where suddenly everything became symbolic: order, identity and the whole political economy critique disappeared. That was my diagnosis in the early 1990s and my first response, as you noted, was a dualistic perspective. I tried to connect in social theory an analysis of political economy with the status order, and showed how inequalities of class intersected with inequalities of status, and yes, thereby to develop a theory of justice that could take in both injustices that point us towards social change.

AC: What new developments led you to extend your framework to include ‘representation’ in addition to recognition and redistribution — the three Rs are a handy alliteration! How do you link this with the notion of the transnational public sphere?

NF: Yes, I do admit that the alliteration was one of the reasons that led me to choose these terms! The crucial factor was that the rise of the identity problematic coincided with another major historical shift,
which was the rise of neoliberalism. These went together in time and had an ironic convergence, which was problematic, and remains so even today. It is one thing to criticize Marxism for not paying enough attention to questions of status and identity at a time when Marxism still had considerable currency, when there were still powerful labour movements and socialist parties in the world. That was a time of relatively robust social democratic movements in North America and Europe, and in India and other developing countries there was a commitment to a ‘developmental state’. The critique of economism meant something in that context. It meant something completely different in the moment when all of that was basically being beaten up by the rise of this amazing free market fundamentalism, Friedmanite stuff and the demise of communism in the Second World (although that was never the most appealing version of socialism from my point of view). Nevertheless, I think this collapse bought the sense to many people, at least for some time, that socialism was a completely dead letter, that the socialist ideal was impossible and that there was no alternative. It became harder in that context to militate for social egalitarian transformations of political economy and even to make straight redistributive demands on behalf of workers, women, low caste, and so on. So that convergence — of the rise of recognition, relative decline of redistribution and rise of neoliberalism — formed a nexus.

What neoliberalism brought with it was an intensification and amplification of forms of transnational/global flows, which were interpreted as putting a lot of pressure on states and the projects of states to create more egalitarian systems. You would know better than me how the politics of a country like India were altered, pressured to open up markets, slash social spending — the whole structural adjustment syndrome.

In this kind of setting it was very interesting to see transnational social movements developing and the critique of neoliberalism coming from the movements. I felt that this might portend a return of the political economic dimension that I thought was in danger of disappearing. Then I realized that it would be very important to overcome the standard form of ‘methodological nationalism’ that troubles so much thinking in our time including left-wing critical thinking like my own. When you don’t talk about what the ‘frame’ is then you get a default idea that you are just talking about the nation state or the multinational state, but it is still the modern territorial state.

Neoliberalism put this question of the frame on the agenda. When you have transnational formations like the World Social Forum critiquing the policies of the IMF and World Bank, then it becomes clearer that we have to take into account, in a much better-theorized way, the whole problematic of neo-imperialism, dependency and other forms of transnational injustice.
AC: Indeed a number of theorists have criticized the Westphalian frame which is seen as becoming redundant with globalization and there are ongoing debates on ‘global citizenship’, ‘cosmopolitanism’, etc. You have engaged with thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas, John Rawls, Michel Foucault, and Hannah Arendt, to outline a ‘post-Westphalian’ mapping of political space that accommodates transnationalism. What is new in your proposal that the theory of social justice must now become a theory of post-Westphalian democratic politics?

NF: I agree that others have certainly been well aware of the question of the frame and are doing very good work on it. My own contribution was to try to understand it through the lens of a political dimension of justice, which is why I called it ‘representation’. I think of the political dimension as intersecting with the economic dimension of justice, which I call redistribution, and with the cultural symbolic status dimension, which I call recognition.

I believe that the political dimension should be understood as a two-levelled concept. We must ask whether everyone who is officially a member really does have equal access to participation and democratic decision making, an equal voice in the public sphere or equal access to power. Are women disadvantaged by the political structures; are low caste people, or racialized minorities, or immigrants? What about people without papers who live in a political community? These are all questions about representation understood within a bounded political community whose boundaries are, in a sense, taken for granted.

But the question of representation can also be understood in a second way, which has to do with the boundaries themselves, and therefore, if I can put it this way, with the construction or design of the broader political space in which bounded political communities are located. For example, David Harvey, interestingly, has distinguished a logic of capital which is de-territorializing — it wants to go everywhere, for it boundaries are just to be overcome: the distinction is between that and a political state logic that is territorialized, that has to stay where its borders are, that decides who is a member, who is not, what is inside and what is outside, a state which needs to define its sovereignty and to keep out competitive powers and so on. Now my idea is that this is right, but there is a broader point that is missing there. The broader point is that you also have a design of political space (call it the interstate system within the so-called Westphalian period, though it looks somewhat different today) that allows for and in a way hosts the various different countries — the bounded political community.

Once you think of that space as political, then you can pose the question of representation at another level, no longer the ordinary political level, but what I call the meta-political level. And when you pose
the question that way, you ask: does this Westphalian division take all the former colonial powers which have grown relatively rich from their imperial projects and construct them as nations, just like the former colonies which became relatively impoverished and posit them all as supposedly equal states? What we have then is a post-Westphalian model of disaggregated sovereignty. You can question whether this system actually prevents us from adequately seeing transborder forms of injustice that persist in our world — whether we are talking about migration flows that are structured by a deeply inegalitarian political economy that operates by some form or other of unequal exchange, or whether we are talking about the global care chain that supplies the commoditized caring work that is absolutely necessary to permit upper middle class women in the first world to pursue professions and break through the glass ceiling, etc. etc.

Within the Westphalian perspective, if you think of political representation only at the level of the bounded political community, then you do not get to that question. The questions we ask then are: do we have the political system which allows the poorer people, the marginalized people in our country, to be heard, to make their claim? Of course, in both cases, the answer is no. But you still don’t get to the other question — who is ‘us’, who ought to have a say in the design of the global political economy, who ought to have a say in the governance structures that regulate migration, ecological issues, international security issues, that regulate intellectual property rights? Who has a say in these forms of global, transnational governance?

So what I thought was that by talking about ordinary political representation and political representation at the meta-political level, I could raise these questions about political justice at the transnational global level. Each one of us, whatever our location, is subject to transnational, regional and global governance structures. These structures are not democratically accountable and need to be made accountable. We need to talk about what it means to have democratic representation at that level too. I mean formal representation but also informal representation in civil society in public spheres and public debate.

I think that the development of international feminism around the UN and its various Conferences (it’s a complicated story) has elements which I would want to be very critical of, but it certainly has done good work in making highly visible this whole problem of international/transnational civil society as a political space in which the problem of representation becomes very present. In being critical, I would say that this is not a space in which, with reference to gender and feminism, there is anything remotely like equal voice, equal access, equal influence or equal power. Even among women’s groups and among feminist groups the access to voice is deeply structured by
all the familiar forms of inequality, dominance and subordination. However, you can still say that international feminism has called our attention to this space. I thought that by theorizing the problem of political representation at two levels, I might be able to contribute to a way of thinking about forms of democratic politics that could bear all of these aspects, enabling us to think about how we can address and contest transnational injustice politically.

AC: You have suggested that one way to do this is via a ‘transnational public sphere’. In earlier work you had criticized Habermas’s (1989) conception of the public sphere as being exclusive since it ‘bracketed’ social inequalities; as androcentric since it proposed a boundary between the public and private on the ground that private issues were not to do with the common good, and that this Habermasian notion of a ‘singular bourgeois public sphere’ had to be revised to allow for ‘subaltern counter-publics’. In your recent work ‘Abnormal Justice’ (Fraser, 2008b) you argue that the shared assumptions of notions of justice have disintegrated and that there are four rival views of the ‘who’ of justice: Westphalian, local-communalist, regional-transnationalist and global-cosmopolitan. You elaborate the possibilities for a ‘new normal’ — a reconstitution of reflexive justice through applying the principle of participation parity. You argue for the importance of validating contestation between diverse views through dialogism. Even as I agree with the direction of your proposals, I remain uneasy about how this would in concrete terms deal with the emergence of transnational political formations such as religious fundamentalist movements that also constitute subaltern counter publics but whose social ontology and political projects would not allow such dialogic engagement. You end ‘Abnormal Justice’ with demanding that ‘the grammar of justice be reconstituted’ so as to enable the subaltern to speak in ‘authoritative terms’ to counter hegemony theory. Don’t the War On Terror and Terrorism both speak in authoritative terms today?

NF: Very good questions — let me take the long way around, since parity of participation has not come up so far, and this is the particular interpretation I am giving to the theory of social justice. It is an interpretation, which is overarching, it is what distributive justice aims at, what recognition aims at, and it is what democratic representation aims at, or rather, ought to aim at. What it means is simply that all the relevant subjects have no entrenched social obstacles that in a structural way prevent them from participation in terms of parity or equality — whether this is participation in formal and informal political and public spheres, institutions, life, in civil society, in the life of associations, in family life, in labour markets, in fact in any and all of the major institutional arenas that are important in society.
This is a notion of justice that says that society should be organized in such a way as to permit everyone who wants to, to participate fully on terms of parity in social life. That’s my general understanding of social justice and I understand it as overarching three principal dimensions of justice — economic, political, cultural/status/legal. Now the problem is how do we get from here to there — what is the long-term vision of a just society?

We find ourselves immersed in deeply unjust conditions — there are economic, political and cultural obstacles, status hierarchies and other forms of symbolic obstacles to parity of participation. These obstacles are at the national, state level and also the transnational level. The question would be whether, even under these unjust conditions, there are ways through democratic contestatory politics to move things in the right direction. Look, otherwise the alternatives would be forms of guerrilla struggle, political violence that we hope to avoid — we don’t want to go there.

What we want to see is whether there are robust forms of non-violent protest — I immediately think of India’s struggle for national independence — and of civil society activism that can set in motion a virtuous spiral effect — that you can get some reforms that can change the balance of power in the right direction. That might permit, if not perfect forms of participation, something that is moving in a more peer-like direction that might permit more robust reforms.

We want to locate politics on this civil society terrain where social movements are contesting amongst themselves and with states and other public powers. Going back to my earlier work for a moment: how do you interpret ‘needs’ and then secondly, how do you win reforms that actually address these needs? When it comes to struggles against Taliban-like, Islamist movements and all forms of fundamentalism that are authoritarian, homophobic, intolerant, chauvinistic, etc. — how should progressive democratic emancipatory movements deal with them? It is a battle for hearts and minds if one can use that language. What I mean is, let’s assume that there are certain types of hard-core militants in all those movements who will not agree with us, but let’s also assume that there might be other, larger strata who are drawn to those movements, who could, if there were alternatives, just as easily be won away. I don’t know if you agree with this, but I have a strong intuition that there are all sorts of rather intelligent young people who thirty years ago would have been secular Trotskyites, who are today drawn to these fundamentalist movements! Part of the story is about the collapse of the secular left. Where are the movements that could win away some of those people?

Now I think I am coming, via a long route, to my new work, which is linked to what you mentioned about social protection. Part of the appeal of these movements is that they provide a sense of solidarity,
a sense of protection from the market and a critique of imperialism. These are three legitimate points that are given a bad articulation, but if we could find alternative articulations around these points, then there is a chance of winning their supporters. The worst thing to do is what the former Bush government did and what unfortunately the Obama government is doing: to send out drones to deal with them and as always happens, kill civilians. All that does is feed right into the paranoia, anti-Americanism, fuelling exactly the forces that we are trying to combat.

So I am trying to rethink feminist and other forms of emancipatory politics in ways that can speak to those legitimate, kernel ideas there that are pulling people into these bad authoritarian movements.

AC: There is a position that argues that the reasons for the emergence and growing strength of religious fundamentalist groups are to do with poverty, and that development will solve the problem. However, studies by Chetan Bhatt for instance, on the influence of transnational religious paramilitia groups, and my own research shows that this is much more complex. What is being offered is a lethal coalescence of welfare/social protection and identity — one cannot just address one and the other will disappear.

NF: I absolutely agree, well put. So here we have a certain way of combining distribution and recognition that presents it as emancipatory and a full conception of justice. But it is not justice for everybody and we who support a broader and truer conception of justice need to provide a new way of combining welfare and identity.

AC: In terms of political practice, however, there remain critical dilemmas. You have mentioned in various places that the human rights regime provided an important frame for claim making. Indeed feminists have fought hard to extend the boundaries of this framework to include rape, forced marriages, domestic violence. There are at the same time serious limitations of the human rights framework itself. Despite talk of the indivisibility of rights, it is civil and political rights, which address the state, that have been enforced or are being struggled for, while social and economic rights that would imply claims also on capital are hardly raised. In development studies today everyone is talking about rights-based development — from WB, DFID, etc. to social movements — all are using the language of voice, agency, rights, yet clearly there are different meanings and agendas.

In the political arena there is another serious dilemma — on one hand the United States-led War on Terror is leading to the suspension of human rights and increased surveillance over the body politic. The language of human rights and human rights defenders is being
appropriated by the US/NATO alliance to legitimate imperialism. It is also being appropriated by organizations that espouse extremist and violent forms of identity-based politics and some human rights organizations are extending their support to them. The space for a position that challenges both these is shrinking and human rights are becoming hostage to broader authoritarian political agendas. There is a return of the multiculturalism debate but in a more complex and fraught context. Given this, is the human rights framework useful at all in the present conjuncture?

NF: I don’t think one can do without it but maybe one should not be putting so much energy into it as a certain generation of feminists did in earlier decades. Whenever any political language which starts in an emancipatory way gets successfully disseminated, at that moment the people who invented it lose control over it — it becomes a ‘floating signifier’ to use E. Laclau’s term — anybody can catch hold of it and use it in some other way. So we had George W. Bush fighting for women’s liberation in Afghanistan. We have militaristic uses of human rights for sure — but we cannot simply say we cannot talk about women’s liberation or human rights just because Bush did and nor can we say that human rights are worthless because they are being appropriated.

Again it is the politics of interpretation — whose interpretation of feminism, of human rights, is going to be hegemonic — it is a struggle for hegemony. I do think that we should have been quicker to appreciate how this Cold War split in the human rights language was going to be taken up in the post-Cold War era. The Cold War split basically was where the US insisted on civil and political rights, while the Soviets and various authoritarian countries insisted that this was a bourgeois trap and what was important were social and economic rights. One aspect of the Cold War was fought out over which interpretation was valid, and with the collapse of the Soviets, triumph of capitalism and rise of US hegemony, we know who won that battle. So it is civil and political rights which are enforced and those to do with fundamental issues of torture, genocide (which is fine — I would have been for military intervention in Rwanda, when push came to shove, to prevent the violence that happened). But you cannot divorce these questions from capitalism, poverty and deep exploitation, from the whole way in which the sub-Saharan African continent has been made the world’s basket case in terms of economic development. All of these issues have to be addressed as well. I do believe in the undivided character of human rights and there remains important work to show how inadequate it is to wrench out one set of rights from their connections with the others.
One could say that the feminist human rights movement was itself divided — there was certainly an important group of feminists and I gather that you are quite connected with it — one section which insisted on the importance of social and economic rights, while others focused almost exclusively on violence and reproduction. The point is that in the neoliberal moment it is always going to be uphill for those who are insisting on the social and the economic rights — the neoliberals would much rather deal with the other side of the story since it fits their agenda — so there is no magic bullet — just have to keep fighting.

AC: At the Dawn Development Debates in January 2010 we were debating this issue and agreed finally that human rights should be seen as instruments and that they had to be cast within a broader framework of social justice — this is why your work is so important. You have been critical of a number of existing theories of distributive justice — Rawls, Dworkin, Rorty, etc. In development studies one theory of justice, which is widely accepted, even has hegemonic status today, comes from Amartya Sen, and to a lesser extent, Martha Nussbaum. How does your theory of social justice differ from theirs?

NF: This is a very interesting question for me because it took me longer than it should have to realize this, but I now believe that my theory does belong to the family of capability theory in the sense that *parity of participation* is also about the capability to act in society. So it is another way of talking about real freedom, positive freedom, so in a general sense it is closer to Sen and Nussbaum than it is to Dworkin or Rawls. However, there are several important differences between my version of a capability theory and theirs. The most general difference with both Sen and Nussbaum is that I am focusing not on individual capability to function — understood as an individual capability. I am focusing on interaction — so my approach has a more robust sense of sociality and inter-subjectivity if you want, than either of theirs. I am saying that justice requires that people be able to interact as peers with others and therefore I am taking it from the start that the problem is not how to get this person’s capabilities enhanced or that person’s capabilities enhanced, as if they were some billiard balls in some space. Society is a field of social interactions and we need to start out with a more robustly social interactive perspective. So I think there is a big difference — I am not focused on individual agency/freedom but more on the interactionist sphere. What they say is very interesting and important, but I think my approach has something more to say — the interactive approach is a genuine advance and contribution.

Secondly, I feel more *simpatico* with Sen than I do with Nussbaum. I do not like the idea of an expert making a list,
however consultative she tries to be. I think, first of all, that there is no list — we should focus not on capabilities but on obstacles to participation — focus on the negative — this is where the action is. How do we know where the obstacles are? Not by sitting in our office and making up lists or even going out and taking a survey and asking people questions. We know what the obstacles are because people protest, social movements arise and people say ‘look, this form of social life is making it impossible for us to do x, y or z’. Social movements are the sensors, the canaries in the cave, this is where we learn about what injustice is and it is only by knowing what injustice is that we know what justice requires. So rather than a list, what we need is a perspective which appreciates that our idea of justice and injustice unfolds historically. Our idea of justice becomes richer, deeper and more complex as history develops through the claims of social movements — it is not something that is just given to us in our thought. So I locate myself in a left Hegelian tradition rather than in a kind of Kantian or Aristotelian neo-contractualist tradition — it’s Hegel–Marx for me rather than Kant–Rawls–Aristotle.

Finally, I think I am also closer to Sen because in *Development as Freedom* (I haven’t studied his new book closely) he made a very important move in saying that in the world there are going to be conflicts between focusing on this capability or that capability and the theorist cannot decide on these conflicts — these have to be worked out politically through democratic deliberation and I would add contestation. I think that is an important insight which I would support since the political dimension of justice becomes deeply significant. I have been trying to complicate how we understand the political dimension of justice by thinking of this problem of the frame, the meta-representation issue, the national issue and what it means to think about democratic participation at a transnational, global, scale. I would leave it at that — I feel a certain kinship at a broad level with Sen, but feel I am offering some new twists and turns to the capability idea.

AC: You have been committed to a transatlantic philosophical debate with critical theory and French post-structuralist philosophy. However, there has been little engagement with post-colonial theorists such as H. Bhaba, G. Spivak, C. Mohanty — why is that? In addition, in tracing the genealogy of feminism you refer primarily to second wave feminism in the US and then in a 2005 article in *Constellations* you mention Europe as the place where new organizing is taking place. As a believer in universalism I am not making the standard accusation of west-centricism since the feminist imaginary has been similar in countries of the North and South, yet given the politics of knowledge production and your sensitivity to social movements, it intrigues me that you don’t really mention the differences in the trajectory of
Southern feminisms which could contribute to a richer production of knowledge. For instance, if we trace the genealogy of Southern feminisms which started and to large extent still continue to link with peasant struggles, working class struggles, the issues of redistribution and recognition are often integrated, though of course, it has required continuous internal struggle to raise issues of caste, gender in these movements. In the last decade indeed there has been more emphasis on sexuality/identity without making these linkages, a development which is often donor driven. But again, today new social movements, for instance in Latin America, combine the feminist with the socialist imaginary — what does their practice and production of counter hegemonic knowledge say to a critical social theory of justice?

NF: I know exactly what you mean and I couldn’t agree more. All thinking is situated and is going to have some insights and some blind spots. I am certainly as limited with as many blind spots as anybody else. There is never a perfect remedy to this but to the degree that we can become broader in our thinking, what one can do to become a better thinker is only through such a dialogue that you are referring to. There is certainly more work that I need to read — I try to read, but I miss stuff of course. I have the privilege of being an English speaker, having access to resources, being an American feminist with its charisma — this all gives me the possibility to travel and I learn a huge amount; there is no substitute for meeting face to face and learning about different struggles. I rely on this and also on debate to correct my blind spots — to point them out and try to overcome them — but many, many blind spots remain, no question about that.

I also take a risk in my work, which is that I do try to paint a big picture — to give a diagnosis of our times. I am not content to say ‘here is how it looks in the US’ — I am trying to say something about processes that I know, even though they are deeply structured by US hegemony, are transnational and global and the only way you can approach such things is to take the risk of saying something that is going to turn out to be Eurocentric or whatever. I am willing to take the risk — I don’t want to give up the attempt to make such a diagnosis — but I will be wrong sometimes.

One thing that has made me feel that at least some of what I have done has been worth it, has been the way in which some people have taken up some of my ideas, tweaked them, corrected them and revised them and used them in other contexts that I was not aware of. I am aware that my work on recognition–redistribution is being used in India and other countries for different purposes and to different ends than those that I started out with — I still have a lot to learn.

AC: In ‘Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History’ (2009) you made a compelling argument that second-wave feminism has a
dangerous liaison with neoliberalism and has been co-opted by the forces of capitalist accumulation. This is not an easy position for feminists to accept, particularly your statement that ‘Our critique of the family wage supplies a good part of the romance that invests flexible capitalism with a higher meaning and a moral point’ — this knocks the bottom out of so many of our struggles. What ‘cunning of history’ led to this outcome?

NF: I have been very influenced by Boltanski and Chiapello’s book, *The New Spirit of Capital* (2007). They went back to Max Weber’s idea that capitalism always needs to borrow charisma from somewhere else to attract people — it has to convince people that there is something more at stake. It needs justifications that link personal gains to some notion of the common good. You remember for Weber, Calvinism and Puritanism gave capitalism that charisma so people thought that working and saving was not just a way of getting more but of saving their eternal souls. Boltanski and Chiapello adapt that idea to post-Fordist flexible capitalism and make a counterintuitive but deeply interesting argument. This new flexible capitalism developed a whole critique of bureaucratic Fordist capitalism which it did by borrowing charisma from the new left. Their critique of conformism, bureaucracy and all the ideas of individual freedom, authenticity, imagination… these ideas which in a sense died out on the left in the 1970s–1980s were taken up by management theorists and were used to give a certain charisma to the high-tech sector — Microsoft, Google — as companies that work in teams without hierarchy, rigidity, giving young people freedom to be creative.

This is a very interesting argument but only half the argument. Boltanski and Chiapello are unfortunately quite gender blind. The other part of the story is women’s labour — the massive inflow of women in the labour force globally — so micro-credit, *maquiladoras*, Walmart, just as much as Google and Microsoft and Bangalore. There is a story about what is giving neoliberalism its charisma on this women’s half of it, and I think it is feminism. It links with what you said about human rights earlier. Feminist ideas are being taken up by neoliberalism and being used to create a romance of the market, of women’s wage labour, of women’s entrepreneurism. So, yes, this is all about giving women choice, empowerment, leverage in the household, in the village. I am not saying either that there isn’t an element of truth in it — there is something in this empowerment story. But the problem is this is all taking place in a context of neoliberalism where states have essentially given up any pretence of macroeconomic policy aimed at fighting poverty and creating full employment. So micro-credit is projected as a panacea to counter poverty, which it cannot do — and then of course we know the stories about private banks getting in,
exorbitant interest rates etc. and the way it is being instrumentalized for profits.

All of these have a certain glamour since they are seen as liberating women. This is another form of a dangerous liaison, an unhappy marriage between feminist ideas, which are being instrumentalized, being taken up by neoliberalism. So here we are, we who in our own way invented and fought for these ideas find ourselves meeting our uncanny double with our own ideas being sent back to us in this somewhat distorted form. We can’t wholly disown this: women who have been excluded in their homes and who are now in the labour market are getting something back but there are coming back in a distorted form. This is a new problem we are facing today that we were not facing fifteen years ago. This does say something about the success of our ideas — that they are worth instrumentalizing — but it also says something about this new constellation, as you put it, of identity and the market.

AC: We come now, of course, to a key question of our present times, the economic crisis. You have said that the ‘The current crisis of neoliberal capitalism is altering the landscape of critical theorizing. During the last two decades, most theorists have kept their distance from the large-scale social theorizing associated with Marxism’. We do now have some Marxist analyses of the crisis but they tend to be economistic and gender blind. Could you share your new work on understanding the crisis in a broader way?

NF: Since you mentioned your work on social protection — that’s a great edgeway. I have been very struck by the need to think about a new crisis critique. Those of us who grew up with Marxism grew up thinking of the idea of a crisis critique. Then a lot of us came to the view that there was something reductive and economistic about the way orthodox Marxism thought about capitalist crisis — tracing everything to the falling rate of profit and system logic. Even those who still do that such as very brilliant people like Harvey, Wallerstein, etc., are doing great work but in my view there is still something reductive and economistic about it. What we have is a deepening financial crisis which is becoming a broader economic crisis — not just Wall Street but Main Street — then the deepening and scary ecological crisis — the dimensions are much worse and they lie about it, the oil spill is much worse than the Exxon and this is only the beginning. Then we have social crisis of enormous dimensions, if you just think about the fraying of solidarity and social bonds, forms of criminality, anomie, war and disease, ravaged communities across the globe. I would add to this list the political crisis in terms of the de-legitimization of democracy, which is being seen as feeble and not up to the task.
Many are wondering if democracy is worth it at all and shouldn’t we get authoritarian regimes to deal with these problems. We have the crisis of territorial national states, the crisis of the EU and its inability to deal with problems it was supposed to and the crisis of global governance.

We need to do a crisis critique again so the problem is how to do this beyond the economistic, functionalist systems model, which we inherited from orthodox Marxism. So for that I reason, I have gone back to Karl Polanyi who I think had a much richer understanding of crisis. He was very prescient in understanding the social dimension of crisis and he understood, at least in a primitive way, the ecological crisis through the idea of ‘land as a fictitious commodity’; he was very prescient also about financial crisis and financial speculation flows as the ‘fictitious commoditization of money’. I think many people realize that this work has strong resonance in our times and that it is a very fruitful place to look. However, the Polanyian notion of a double movement is totally inadequate — i.e. the idea that we have to look at the struggle of two forces — the forces that want to expand and autonomize the market and the forces of social protection. You put your finger on it a few minutes ago when you referred to Islamist movements and other forms of religious fundamentalisms as offering a form of social protection.

No feminist can hear the word ‘protection’ today without having bells ringing because historically the forces of social protection have also been the locus of women’s oppression and many other forms of domination. So my idea is to introduce a third category, which Polanyi altogether missed, and to think about a third movement. My proposal is that the third axis has to be emancipation. We have to think about the collision between three different social projects — marketization, social protection, emancipation — and look at how these projects collide and become ambivalent as they interact.

I am only at the beginning of this, but my idea is that Polanyi only focused on the collision between marketization and social protection. He failed to see that this collision was mediated/cross cut by struggles for emancipation: struggles to end slavery, end colonialism, to liberate women — these were all waged for emancipation and they do not fit neatly into either side of his double movement. They were often critiques of oppressive forms of social protection but they were not necessarily celebrating marketization either — maybe not wholly condemning it. So social protection is already ambivalent: it can protect people from markets and, on the other hand, expose them to domination.

Now let’s turn that around: emancipation is also ambivalent. It can delegitimize and fight against domination but it can also form a dangerous liaison with marketization. It can erode the forms of solidarity
and community, the ethical substance that has undergirded protection and in that way it can converge with the neoliberal critique of protection. So in the struggle for emancipation we need to understand how we can unwittingly end up siding with marketization against social protection. I want to develop the analysis of this three-sided conflict and we can use this to understand the conflicts of our time in a neo-Polanyian way — this would lead us (linked to your first question of theory and practice) to develop an analysis and a project that would break off the dangerous liaison with marketization and try to forge some new kind of principled alliance with the forces of social protection. This would be a very tricky business, as we know that many of them are reactionary, homophobic, racist, patriarchal, etc., etc. This gets back to that idea of how could we integrate our long-standing commitment to overcoming domination with recognizing the legitimate interest people have in security, stability, solidarity, protection without neglecting the legitimate interest in negative liberty that the neoliberals are right to raise as well.

This would mean broadening our notions of justice to find some kind of synthesis, and developing this following Polanyi’s insight into the three fictitious commodities. He was right that something special happens when you commodify nature, labour and money. I want to take these three fictitious commodities and look at how they have been commoditized today in ways that Polanyi could never have imagined — with commoditization of DNA, genomes, intellectual property, biopiracy, commoditization of care — the whole invisible background of work is now out in the open and this introduces deep contradictions including those of class — and of course money — derivatives, credit default, etc. We have to analyse all of this stuff because this is lethal.

I would like to look at advances in the marketization of these three and how each one becomes a flashpoint for social struggles in a three-sided way. So that is what I am doing now and will continue to work on for several years. The crisis is here to stay, and while I learn a lot from Harvey, Brenner and Wallerstein, we need to think about it beyond their focus still on traditional Marxian connections.

AC: We look forward to this. As with all your work this promises to be exciting and will definitely elicit passionate debate.

REFERENCES

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