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## **Introduction.**

# **Perspectives on Nancy Fraser’s Thought: Philosophy, Feminism, Capitalism, and the Climate Crisis<sup>1</sup>**

Nancy Fraser is one of the most important intellectuals of our time. Philosopher, critical theorist of society, feminist theorist and activist: with her influential work from the 1980s until today Fraser has offered significant contributions in the fields of social and political theory, feminist theory, contemporary philosophy, and lately in the debates around the relation between climate change and capitalism. On the occasion of Fraser’s 75<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2022, and on that of the 10<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of the publication of two of her books in 2023 – respectively, *Fortunes of Feminism* (2013) and *Redistribution or Recognition?* (2003, co-authored with Axel Honneth) –, the monographic section of the present issue of “Scenari” aims to celebrate these anniversaries with selected contributions dedicated to the investigation of her work and thought.

After the publication of our Call for Papers on the website of “Scenari”, several scholars with different backgrounds and working in different disciplines generously submitted their contributions dealing with various aspects of Fraser’s philosophical-political work and the main fields of her research, in order to assess their relevance and impact today. We had specified in our Call for Papers that we would particularly welcome articles attempting to evaluate the significance of Fraser’s thought in the context of strictly contemporary debates, also by means of a critical

<sup>1</sup> For Stefano Marino this publication (as co-author of the Introduction and co-editor of the whole issue) represents one of the outcomes of his participation – as a member of the Research Unity based at the University of Bologna – to the Research Project of National Interest (PRIN) entitled *Italian Feminist Photography: Identity Politics and Gender Strategies*, funded by the Italian Minister for University and Research (MUR), and guided by Prof. Federica Muzzarelli as Principal Investigator.

comparison with the conceptions of other authors who have addressed questions concerning the concept of justice, feminist theory and practice, the critique of capitalist society, and the social and political impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Also contributions dealing with Fraser's notion of capitalism as an "institutionalized social order" and with her groundbreaking definition of a "progressive neoliberalism", or, more recently, issues dealing with her theory of "cannibal capitalism", were very appreciated. Furthermore, we had invited scholars to pay particular attention to the interweaving of four different phenomena that Fraser has isolated in order to describe the current political "interregnum": the ecological crisis, the crisis of care and health, the economic crisis, and the social crisis. In this respect, in our Call for Papers we had specified that a particular consideration could be also given to contributions aimed at assessing the potential and possible limits of Fraser's diagnosis of contemporary capitalist societies and their multiple crises, in a spirit of philosophical research understood as genuine critical investigation that could go with Fraser beyond Fraser.

As we said, our Call for Papers attracted the interest of various authors, who generously submitted their contributions in response to our Call. Beside these contributions, we also decided to include some articles by esteemed colleagues who are experts of Fraser's thinking, and whom we thus invited to contribute to our volume. As a result, the monographic section of "Scenari" that we are happy to present here to our readers includes seven articles that, as we believe, will disclose to the readers of "Scenari" various stimulating and indeed original *perspectives on Nancy Fraser's thought*.

The first three contributions, authored by Sandro Mezzadra, Vanessa RIELA and Fulvia GIACHETTI, discuss some fundamental topics of Fraser's broad and versatile thinking. The questions concerning exploitation, critique, socialism and neoliberalism are central in the critical confrontations with Fraser's thought engaged by these three authors. Because of their rigorous focus on such topics that have played a decisive role in the development of Fraser's philosophy, we believe that Mezzadra's, RIELA's and GIACHETTI's articles form together a strong and coherent opening section for our volume. In fact, the analysis of some crucial social issues offers an excellent insight into Fraser's critical theory, both by providing fundamental conceptual tools which are paramount for its understanding and, at the same time, by challenging it, forcing its limits and reaffirming its heuristic potential.

Sandro Mezzadra's essay, entitled *Verso una nuova teoria dello sfruttamento. Dialogando con Nancy Fraser*, starts from the discussion led by Fraser and Axel Honneth on the well-known concepts of exploitation and expropriation. The way in which Fraser addresses this issue is tak-

en by Mezzadra as a starting point to analyze Fraser's reflections on the complex interconnection between capitalism, racism and sexism. In doing so, he stresses Fraser's merit of having contributed to reconsider the paramount importance of social reproduction in understanding capitalist relations of production. In particular, Mezzadra places special emphasis on Fraser's "Polanyian attitude", which leads her to take into account the social contradictions of a capitalist system which, despite resting on social reproduction, undermines its conditions of possibility.

By highlighting the cruciality of the political potential of the sphere of social reproduction, Mezzadra discusses the utility of Fraser's notion of "boundary struggles", which concerns struggles over non directly economic domains. Whereas the concept of boundary struggles – not unlike that of "border struggles", developed by Mezzadra himself and Brett Neilson in their 2013 essay *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* – emphasizes the pivotal role of socio-political battles concerning capitalism's hidden abode, that is, battles over non strictly economic spheres that enable the very functioning of capitalism, the risk seen by Mezzadra is that of assuming a conception of the economic solely centered on the production of commodities and almost completely deprived of its socio-reproductive dimension.

Following this train of thought, in the final pages of his essay Mezzadra points out the limits of Fraser's seemingly dichotomous understanding of the dual concept of exploitation/expropriation, which in his view is approached in a somewhat narrow way: one cannot consider as subjects of exploitation only those who freely dispose of their workforce. In fact, as Mezzadra stresses, those under the yoke of expropriation are not always external to the sphere of production; rather, they do enter the world of exploitation, although in a hierarchical and not always legal way. Moreover, the above mentioned dichotomy can be further criticized, as, for example, the very same domain of labor is crossed by continuous expropriation processes, as perfectly shown by platform capitalism and logistics. At the same time, even social reproduction cannot be solely understood as a fundamental prerequisite of production, since it has become crucial to the valorization of capital. Finally, Mezzadra's contribution suggests a broader analysis of the interweaving action between expropriation and exploitation, which could be translated into a productive theoretical effort aimed at better articulating Fraser's vision of a socialism for the twenty-first century.

Vanessa Riela's essay, entitled *Nancy Fraser e il dibattito sul socialismo nel XXI secolo*, focuses precisely on the latter. By taking into account the historical rupture brought about by the 2008 Great Recession, Riela offers a critical overview of some of the most influential debates centered around the very notion of socialism. The author highlights the strengths

and limits of the various reflections on socialism developed by Fraser, Honneth, Erik Olin Wright and Gerald Allan Cohen, and reaffirms the importance of a historicization of this concept.

The notion of socialism provided by Fraser is furthermore examined by Riela through a retrospective look which aims at considering Fraser's whole intellectual trajectory. Her understanding of socialism as an "institutionalized social order" offers a fundamental conceptual tool capable of excavating the complex interrelations between the economic domain of production and the non-economic sphere of reproduction. This is only possible thanks to the foundation of a new social order which can implement three different scales of justice, that is, redistribution, recognition and political representation. In fact, capitalism's multifactorial oppression, which rests on class domination, sex, gender and race discrimination, imperialist rule and political domination, can only be eradicated through such a wide notion of justice, which has nothing to do with the empty and classist promises of the so-called "progressive neoliberalism".

The analysis of Fraser's conception of neoliberal capitalism is at the center of Fulvia Giachetti's essay, entitled *Un'ampia concezione della critica. Nancy Fraser e la questione neoliberale*. The author reconstructs Fraser's notion of "progressive neoliberalism", which creates a productive synergy between a critical posture towards social conservatism, on the one hand, and towards economic and social interventionism, on the other hand. This is especially true for that elitist neoliberal feminism which does not aim at the widest possible diffusion of social justice among women belonging to different classes, but rather promotes the socio-economic advancement of only few privileged women. Neoliberal feminist emancipation, in this view, does not eradicate sex and gender hierarchies, but simply reconfigures them by letting the 1% break the glass ceiling. As Fraser has shown throughout her works, the recognition of symbolic and contractual equality does not imply the achievement of material equality. Progressive neoliberalism thus creates the illusion of a broad recognition of class, gender and race differences, whereas it leaves the material and hierarchical structure of society entirely unchanged.

As Giachetti clearly shows, Fraser comes to the conclusion that this widespread theoretical disregard for socio-material concerns has led, on a political-empirical level, to the ascent of political forces, which in the last ten years in the USA have revitalized a political narrative (be it on the left-wing spectrum of Sanders, or on the right-wing spectrum of Trump) based on references to the "working class". Although the latter's rhetorical rehabilitation was shaped in profoundly different ways, it is nonetheless the unequivocal sign of neoliberalism's hegemonic crisis, which has abolished any class-based discourse. It is precisely the deep capitalistic crisis we are witnessing today, the monstrous interregnum we are in, that

creates the conditions for a counter-hegemony capable of attacking the capitalist system at its very roots.

At this point Giachetti recalls Fraser's last inquiries into the cannibalistic, self-destructive dynamic which is threatening capitalism's existence by undermining both the economic and the extra-economic domain on which it is based. The class subject envisioned by Fraser is not unified by the sharing of the same sociologic condition within the capitalist system, but emerges at the conjunction of exploitation, expropriation and misrecognition: it is produced by the emergence of various types of struggles – feminist, ecological, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, labor struggles – which are heading towards an overcoming of capitalism itself. Although Giachetti raises some objections towards the conceptual vagueness regarding the role of nations or the institution of private property with respect to the global anti-capitalist struggle, she fully praises Fraser's contribution to critical theory, especially her attempt to reconstruct a theoretical and political reflection capable of connecting the critique of political economy with the critique of micro-political subjectivation and of cultural hegemony.

The next two contributions, authored by Anna Cavaliere and Paola Rudan, play a fundamental role in the general context of our collection. In fact, also these two authors focus their attention on some of the most important topics and themes of Fraser's thinking, such as the questions of justice and recognition. At the same time, Cavaliere's and Rudan's contributions also outline the possibility of certain original reinterpretations of those questions, by means of a close reading of Fraser's interpretation of the fiction novel *Never Let Me Go* and by means of a comparison with Judith Butler's views in light of the stimulating and topical problems posed today by the so-called "algorithmic turn". On this basis, these two authors' articles form together a sort of "transitional" subsection in our volume, that is, a short subsection that is consistently connected to the three articles that articulate the opening section and, at the same time, paves the way to the further interpretive developments that are at the center of the last two contributions included in our volume.

In particular, Anna Cavaliere's contribution, entitled *Fraser legge Never Let Me Go. Una lezione sulla giustizia a tre dimensioni*, proposes an original approach to the question of justice. In fact, by analyzing Fraser's essay *On Justice. Lessons from Plato, Rawls and Ishiguro* published in 2012 in the "New Left Review", Cavaliere reconstructs Fraser's interpretation of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go*. The narrative framework of this dystopian science fiction novel published in 2005 offers a privileged prism through which it is possible to unveil the social dynamics which underpin contemporary neoliberal capitalism and its negation of the three dimensions of justice: redistribution, recognition and representa-

tion. The story is set in a British boarding school. It is a perfect metaphor for the cultural hegemony of neoliberalism, for the way in which it acts at a psycho-social and “micro-physical level” (borrowing a Foucauldian notion), and for the placid social acceptance of the negation of fundamental human rights. What appeared at first glance as the perfect human environment, where the characters of the novel have the chance to cultivate their personalities and talents, turns out to be a dystopian nightmare: the young students raised at Hailsham school are nothing less than clones whose organs are at the disposal of other people. As Cavaliere notes, what is truly striking about the story is that the characters involved do not protest in any way: the possibility of a collective action is hampered by the diffusion of a profoundly individualistic eschatology. The only way to escape is to show their individual merits, their specialness.

By taking into account Fraser’s works dealing with the concept of justice, Cavaliere shows how the story told in *Never Let Me Go* sheds light on the pervasiveness of social injustice in neoliberal contemporary regimes: the vicissitudes described in the novel perfectly exemplify the three dimensions of social injustice isolated by Fraser. In fact, *Never Let Me Go* is a story of denied rights: the subjects involved are not considered individuals belonging to a political community in which they can make their demands be heard (misrepresentation), they are not considered as legal entities because of their status as non-persons (misrecognition), and they are integrally exploited as a class and expropriated of their bodies as to guarantee the health and well-being of a higher social stratum (misdistribution). That is why Cavaliere convincingly speaks about a dystopia of social reproduction and discusses, in the final passages of her contribution, Fraser’s latest reflections on the co-dependence of the notions of exploitation and expropriation.

The starting point in Paola Rudan’s essay, entitled *Che cosa resta del riconoscimento? Rileggere Fraser e Butler nell’algorithmic turn*, is the observation that the Hegelian philosophical category of recognition has taken on renewed importance in recent years in relation to issues of identity and difference. Building on these considerations, a careful analysis and an equally careful comparison of Fraser’s and Butler’s perspectives on this issue is elaborated. On the one hand, Fraser proposes a “deconstructive recognition” based on the assumption that difference recognition policies risk reifying identities and being used to further the operation of neoliberal systems. It is therefore, according to Fraser, a matter of moving away from identity politics and pursuing egalitarianism to achieve redistributive politics. On the other hand, Butler also proposes a policy of equality aimed at overcoming identity politics and understands inequality as the result of differential distribution of recognition. However, Butler’s position differs from Fraser’s. According to Butler, Fraser pursues an ab-

stract conception of equality, failing to consider the weight of “normative heterosexuality” in the reproduction of capitalism. In short, as Rudan notes, the positions on recognition developed by the two authors diverge on the analysis of the relationship between difference and inequality. Indeed, Fraser argues that not all differences are equivalent, and that sexual orientation is not an organizing criterion of the labor market, as gender and race are. For Butler, however, differences are important when they show the limits of the abstract universalism that governs access to citizenship and resources.

Based precisely on these analyses, Rudan’s essay then moves on to investigate how the category of recognition has been used in the context of the so-called algorithmic turn. In particular, Rudan examines the position of Joy Buolamwini, who notes an overlap between discrimination and misidentification. Indeed, this author shows how facial recognition systems misidentify, through biased recognition technologies, certain categories of people who are already discriminated against (based on color, gender, age). According to these reflections, therefore, it is not equality that is misidentified – as it was for Fraser – but difference. Indeed, the purpose of Buolamwini is to correct the effects of misidentification, not the causes. However, as Rudan notes leaning on Wendy Chun’s analyses, in this way algorithmic recognition institutionalizes social differences and inequalities, codifying them in identity terms. Discrimination is intrinsic to the operation of algorithmic recognition itself, insofar as it translates inequalities into attributes of subjects.

In conclusion, Rudan closes the circle of her essay by showing how Butler’s, but especially Fraser’s, reflections on identity politics find concretization in the algorithmic procedures implemented by neoliberal programs. These, in fact, define the criteria for recognizing subjects and the parameters of access to rights and resources. Therefore, the critique of algorithmic recognition, understood as the automated reproduction of institutionalized value models, can only be acted as a critique of neoliberal identity politics. As Rudan effectively states, “a politics of equality requires [...] that the struggle for recognition is also a struggle against recognition” capable of “modifying the social relations from which the algorithm learns and which it reproduces” (p. 219).

Last but not least, our collection includes two more articles, authored by Ermelinda Rodilosso and Lautaro Leani, that together form a sort of final subsection, markedly characterized by the original interpretive approach of these authors. Also Rodilosso and Leani focus their attention on some fundamental topics and themes that have been at the center of Fraser’s thinking for a long time, such as questions concerning anti-capitalism, intersectionality, ecology and feminism. Rodilosso and Leani originally address these questions with a genuine critical approach, ani-

mated by the impulse to propose a critical rethinking of those problems, in order to reopen certain debates, offer new readings of certain concepts and disclose new possibilities for a critical understanding of the real not only in light of what exists (i.e., the existing order of society), but also in light of what could have been, and especially in light of what could possibly change in the future.

In her essay entitled *The Critical Need for an Anticapitalist and Intersectional Paradigm for Ecological Thinking*, Ermelinda Rodilosso focuses on the most innovative aspects of the ecological investigations developed by Fraser, starting from an intersectional perspective, which also characterizes the thought of the investigated author. In particular, Rodilosso's analysis moves from a timely consideration: in recent years, numerous interconnected crisis conditions (pandemic, humanitarian, ecological, etc.) have been observed, which have highlighted that the functioning of the capitalist system inevitably entails social, political, and environmental repercussions. It is necessary, therefore, to develop an anti-capitalist and intersectional paradigm as the beating heart of an ecological proposal aimed at ensuring the future survival of the natural environment.

It is precisely at this level that Fraser's ecological thinking proves effective. Rodilosso follows its development from her reflections on capitalism (which resonate with those of Rosa Luxemburg, David Harvey, but especially Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt). Specifically, Rodilosso notes that, while moving within a Marxist perspective, the author manages to renew it by redefining the foundations of the capitalist system. Indeed, Fraser develops a sharp critique of capitalism, recognizing the need for its radical overcoming, through a broad definition of the phenomenon, understood as an "institutionalized social order" – a conceptualization investigated by Rodilosso from the analyses of Fraser's collaboration with Rahel Jaeggi in *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory*. As Rodilosso shows, the main characteristic of capitalism highlighted by Fraser is that it relies on the institutionalization of structural divisions that inevitably lead to systemic crises and phenomena of oppression. Moreover, although different forms of discrimination and oppression (relating to gender, race, sexual orientation, ecology, and political power) exhibit intraspecific characteristics, they nevertheless have clear points of intersection and are part of the same capitalist structure of domination.

According to Rodilosso, it is precisely from such a consideration that one can understand the strength of an intersectional proposal such as Fraser's that draws on feminist, postcolonial and, indeed, ecological analyses. It is in fact by moving from this perspective that one must understand the scope of the ecological crisis, which should not be analyzed as a condition separate from other types of crises. It is therefore a matter of avoiding a reductive ecologism and recognizing the capitalogenic rather



than anthropogenic basis of climate change, without forgetting – as Rodilosso stresses, going beyond Fraser – the weight of individual responsibilities in these processes. Ultimately, Rodilosso recognizes that Fraser’s ecological analyses have the great merit of highlighting how environmental injustice moves hand in hand with systemic social injustice, further promoting the need to build a counter-hegemonic, trans-ecological and anti-capitalist project.

Finally, Lautaro Leani’s contribution, entitled *Thinking Ableism through Heterocissexism. A Critical Review of Fraser’s Redistribution-Recognition Pair from a Queer-Crip Perspective*, starts from a critical examination of Fraser’s philosophical framework of justice in the 1990s and originally intersects this topic with some questions concerning heterocissexism, ableism and the perspective defined by Leani as “queer-crip”. The author assumes as the point of departure of his analysis the fact that, in the last centuries, social justice has been understood as one of the major philosophical issues and that, in this context, what he calls Fraser’s “perspectival dualism” (because, for Leani, this dualism is simply perspectivist, and not ontological) has meritoriously emphasized the equal importance of two dimensions of justice: redistribution and recognition – with their respective forms of injustice: maldistribution and misrecognition. Leani recognizes that, after proposing this two-dimensional framework, Fraser has further theorized a three-dimensional model which also includes political representation as a separate dimension; however, as he explains, although this model is surely interesting, nonetheless the specific and delimited aims of his contribution lead him to concentrate only on the framework focused on redistribution and recognition.

Leani particularly focuses his attention on the notion of “despised sexuality”, as a part of Fraser’s two-dimensional model. This notion is connected to heterocissexism and the latter, in turn, shares with ableism the characteristic of being connected in an essential way to the unequal economic system of capitalism and being functional to it. For Leani, Fraser’s two-dimensional framework must be appreciated for its capacity to identify the political strategies that attempt to reduce social injustices, and he considers the redistribution/recognition distinction as essential in order to investigate the origins and development of systems of oppression. At the same time, however, according to Leani, this distinction has also precise limits, for example when it comes to explaining the particular injustices connected to heterocissexism and ableism. For Leani, indeed, it is not possible to solve the effects of heterocissexism – understood by him as a system of oppression that is based on the normative regimes of heteronormativity and cisnormativity that condition in a strong way the people’s access to institutions, participation and also self-perception – only by addressing the component of recognition. So, Leani suggests a

shift to what he calls a queer-crip perspective, based on questioning the stability of identities and the devices that are responsible for bodily normalization. According to him, adopting a queer-crip perspective makes it possible to disclose new possibilities to understand social groups from dynamic and intersectional points of view, thus developing non-identitarian conceptions of social struggles for justice that can grasp in a more precise way the particular functioning of heterocissexism and its connection to ableism. For Leani, this perspective can promisingly open new political alliances and it is on this basis that Leani eventually emphasizes the transformative potentialities of a queer-crip perspective in terms of a guide for action.

In conclusion, all the contributions of our monographic issue let the disruptive potential of Fraser's social, economic and political theory emerge, together with her capacity to unveil injustice and the hidden pre-conditions of a capitalist society. This is an approach and an impulse that *mutatis mutandis* has always been at the core of the philosophical and sociological tradition that, from Horkheimer and Adorno until today, we have all known as *critical theory*: a tradition to which also Nancy Fraser's work coherently belongs and which Fraser has meritoriously enriched and further developed throughout her long career in original, stimulating and noteworthy ways, thus deserving to be celebrated as one of the philosophical masters of our time<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> In using the expression "Master of Our Time" to define Nancy Fraser, we remind our readers that in 2022 Fraser was awarded a Prize precisely entitled "Masters of Our Time" and sponsored by the Italian distillery Grappa Nonnino. Quite significantly also for the aims of the present volume, the motivation for this Prize assigned to Fraser reads: "To the American thinker Nancy Fraser whose non-conformist thinking is all the more valuable in a conformist world. In addition to her important contributions on the theme of 'recognition', Nancy Fraser addresses the problems of injustice, in particular, the structural injustices that pervade our society and align with social divisions such as gender, race/ethnicity, and class. As a critical theorist, she analyzes such injustices, reveals their root causes, and suggests how they might be remedied. To be a feminist, in her words, simply means 'assuming that gender injustices exist and are pervasive and structurally grounded; that they are 'wrong'; and that in principle they can be overcome.'" (see: <https://www.grappanonino.it/en/news/nonino-prize-2022-winners>).