

Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory* (edited by Brian Milstein), Cambridge: Polity, 2018. ISBN: 978-0-745-67156-7 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-745-67157-4 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-509-52526-3 (ebook)

The actually existing Left is divided. What some view as antiracism, others dismiss as identity politics. Self-proclaimed feminists maintain their work-life balance by hiring underpaid women of color. And where some see Shell's sponsoring of the Amsterdam Canal Parade as progress, others see pinkwashing. This actual division among the so-called Left at least partly reflects theoretical confusion, not only among left-leaning citizens themselves but equally so among academics and public intellectuals who seemingly don't theorize how this is all related to contemporary capitalism. Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi think this important feature of the current political landscape through by historicizing, conceptualizing and criticizing capitalism in a series of recorded conversations, which were partly edited by Brian Milstein, partly rewritten by the authors themselves.

According to Fraser, a defining feature of capitalism is that production factors (land, capital and labor) are marketized. (This distinguishes capitalism from a feudal society, in which there were markets for consumption goods.) This is of course a common approach. However, Fraser broadens the conception of capitalism by integrating what she calls the background conditions of capitalism. Capitalism is about the growth of invested capital and produced products, but a capitalist growth-regime can only reproduce itself by freeriding on ecology (natural resources), the state (building infrastructure and repressing dissent) and the family (replenishing labor). These background conditions are used as free gifts by capital, but how they are otherwise arranged changes over time, leading to changing "boundary struggles".

After WWII reproductive labor was split off by relegating care-work to the state (education) and to the home, where women took care of the children. This was made possible by men earning a family wage. In earlier times reproductive labor was undertaken by extended kinship (in mercantile capitalism), whereas nowadays the model of the two-earner family has arisen. The latter follows the retrenchment of public care and education and is made possible by the recruitment of (often foreign) women into low-waged service work.

Each of these different organizations of reproductive labor has led to struggle. In the 1960s and 1970s feminists successfully opposed the subjugated role of women in the Fordist era. However, this didn't end sexism. Sexism, then, is not a remnant from a pre-capitalist era, but is an integral, functional part of the social formation that capitalism is. It cannot be eradicated in a (capitalist) society that separates production from reproduction. As long as caring, nursing and education are treated as gifts that are not (fully) compensated, someone needs to do these things "voluntarily" and without complaining. Capitalism needs (the gendered role of) women and needs sexism to keep them in line.

The Fordist era was no paradise for at least one other reason. The capitalist core colonized and expropriated large parts of the global South. What is more, although colonialism has ebbed, expropriation hasn't. Capitalism has always accumulated through both exploitation (of rights-bearing individuals who "freely" sell their labor) in the core *and* by expropriation (of disposable subjects without rights) in the periphery. The latter group is nowadays increasingly made up of people in the core as well ("illegals", felons, the unemployed and debt peons). And again, this is all functionally necessary. Capital needs expropriation for the dirty work. It thus needs (the social role of) black slaves. It needs racism. Fraser theorizes racism and sexism as constitutive parts of capitalism: "gender and racial subordination, imperialism and political domination, ecological depredation ... are built-in structural features of capitalist society" (p.109).

Capitalism is not only an economic system but a totalized social formation. Fraser distinguishes antagonism *within* the economy from crises at the economic boundaries (politics, the family, nature). The first is associated with class struggle, the latter with struggles between capital and those who oppose its usurpation of nature, reproductive labor and the state. Fraser proposes that all these struggles, organizationally divided they may be, should be combined, as all are ultimately produced by the same capitalist order and all are necessary to overcome that order. In doing so, Fraser relates to the Polanyian conception of capitalist antagonisms by broadening it. Whereas Polanyi (2001) proposed that capitalist marketization and commodification clash with the need to and the desire for social protection, Fraser proposes that actually three societal values can clash and must be mediated: marketization, social protection *and* emancipation. Those longing for the Fordist era can only

do so if they ignore the racism, the colonialism and the sexism that were part of that accumulation regime. The other way round, the progressive-neoliberal aim is not to abolish social hierarchy but to “diversify” it.

Most of the above has followed Fraser’s line of reasoning. This corresponds with the book’s set-up, which consists of thoughtful pondering and questioning by Jaeggi – Professor of Social and Political Philosophy at the Humboldt University of Berlin – followed by lengthy, informative answers by Fraser – Professor of Political and Social Science at the New School in New York. This set-up works, as the conversation allows for interesting digressions and informative clarifications without losing focus. And that focus is clear and convincing. Anyone calling for diversity or emancipation without critiquing the economic order is effectively proposing a rearranged hierarchy. Anyone dismissing antiracism as secondary is, knowingly or not, supporting a key pillar of capitalism’s appropriation.

The authors leave some issues underdeveloped. They do not consider whether the actually existing divide on the Left reflects different interests. It arguably makes sense for rich women to focus on breaking the glass ceiling rather than on lifting the floor for all (poor) women. Many a white moderate, as Martin Luther King (2018) pointed out, “... is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice ... prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice”. The authors likewise don’t consider the role of capital as a political actor in inciting racism and sexism. Large newspapers and TV-stations facilitating or propagating this are pretty much all owned by wealthy investors, who arguably don’t mind steering the rage produced by unemployment and inequality in the “right” direction.

This does not weaken the book’s analysis, which is interesting and relevant. It underlines that any criticism of capitalism worth that name does not prioritize one struggle over another. Since capitalist society is a totalized whole, so its critique must be.

References

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