

Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System Is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet—and What We Can Do About It*, New York: Verso, 2022. ISBN: 9781839761232 (cloth); ISBN: 9781839761256 (ebook)

Nancy Fraser's new book, *Cannibal Capitalism*, advances a simple premise: in order to effectively struggle against capitalism, we have to first properly theorise what capitalism actually *is*. Rather than restricting our understanding of capitalism to labour exploitation, the classic domain of most Marxist analysis, Fraser argues that the capitalist mode of (re)production is best apprehended as an "institutionalized societal order" (p.19) that necessitates constant cannibalising of hidden but essential background conditions for value-creating exploitation to take place at all. In turn, this expanded approach to capitalism—awkwardly termed "cannibal capitalism", another addition to the pantheon of supposed variations of capitalism—helps explain the roots of many worsening crises and broadens both "[w]hat counts as an anti-capitalist struggle" (p.25) and genuine socialist alternatives.

To argue this case, Fraser focuses on four intertwined "background conditions of possibility" for global capitalism: racialised and imperialist expropriation; gendered social reproduction; appropriation of nonhuman natures; and erosion and hijacking of public/state powers (p.3). Each of these conditions is assessed through a dedicated chapter that examines their respective centrality to capitalist value-creation and periodises their development and ongoing resilience within contemporary capitalism. Binding the book's argument together is the concept of an "ex/ex nexus", Fraser's shorthand for the structural relationship of expropriation with exploitation (p.48).

Rather than expropriation only constituting an initial kickstart to capitalist development via so-called "primitive accumulation", a widely critiqued assumption (Coulthard 2014; Federici 2004; Harvey 2003; Patnaik and Patnaik 2016), Fraser contends that theft of labour, lands, resources, and capacities is "a built-in feature of capitalist society, as constitutive and structurally grounded as exploitation" (p.15). While the "ex/ex nexus" has transformed in some of its specific

manifestations, the system's underlying parasitism remains structurally untroubled, requiring free or low-cost inputs (like raw materials and energy) to reduce costs of social reproduction and increase relative surplus value. This heuristic isn't especially precise—for instance, the line between when one's compensation shifts from expropriation or “superexploitation” (Smith 2016) to regular exploitation isn't made clear—but it remains a helpful tool to think through these issues in general terms.

Of course, this kind of argument isn't by any means new. Such a case has long been made by Marxist feminists and social reproduction theorists, ecosocialists and world-ecologists, and anti-colonial and anti-imperialist thinkers, tracing back to at least Rosa Luxemburg and her 1913 *The Accumulation of Capital*. Although some fairly unconvincing theoretical differences are outlined in the footnotes, Fraser draws heavily on the recent work of Jason W. Moore (2015) and his emphasis on “cheap” natures and things, including his similar “dialectic of exploitation and appropriation”. She also integrates the work of the late James O'Connor (1998), who theorised three “conditions of production”—personal (social reproduction); natural; communal (including urban and transportation infrastructure)—that capital required for profitable accumulation but often fails to reproduce, leading to the possibility of crises of liquidity/valorisation rather than overproduction/realisation (Rudy 2019).

As such, the benefit of Fraser's work isn't that it's offering especially *novel* ideas but rather that it works to productively synthesise them into a holistic, expansive, and highly accessible framework. While all the main four chapters are well worth reading, this benefit is most clearly displayed in the section on the structural racism of capitalism, in which Fraser applies the “ex/ex” framework to histories of colonisation, slavery, imperialism, and other forms of specifically racialised expropriation. This chapter was derived from Fraser's 2018 presidential address at the American Philosophical Association titled “Is Capitalism Necessarily Racist?”, delivered at a time of resurging interest in the theory of racial capitalism and debates over whether the connection between race and capitalism is necessary or contingent.

Fraser mostly takes a strong position on the question, arguing that racialisation—a process largely led by states through global colonisation and imperialism, along with development of citizenship, laws, and hierarchies—enables “confiscating human capacities and natural resources and conscripting them into the circuits of capital expansion” (p.34). The formation and incorporation of the white “citizen-worker” in Europe and North America was essential to this, Fraser writes, requiring the simultaneous development of the “dependent racialized expropriable subject” (p.42) both at home and abroad as a “hidden condition of possibility for the freedom of those whom ... [capital] exploits” (p.33). Later chapters in the book continue to provide specific examples of this racialised expropriation in the Global South, including the targeted colonial destruction of petty production to secure cheap raw materials and profitable markets (p.98), or environmental load displacement and “intensified private plunder of nature” (p.100).

However, Fraser ultimately concludes that while racialised expropriation is still ongoing in some aspects, we have supposedly witnessed “the crumbling, if not the full demise, of what has served historically as racism’s structural basis in capitalist society” (p.48). Further, she suggests the dividing “ex/ex” line between the “merely” exploited white worker and expropriated racialised subject has blurred into a continuum, a development that has created an increasingly universalised hybrid figure that is both exploited and expropriated to varying degrees (p.46). This is an unfortunate move that ultimately weakens the strength of the argument.

While it’s undeniable that the devastating neoliberal assault on jobs, wages, and the social safety net has vastly increased precarity and indebtedness—including for most white “citizen-workers” of the Global North—it’s equally undeniable that the “global racial empire” (Táíwò 2022) continues to play a fundamental role in capitalism, in many ways determining who lives and dies, how much or little one is paid for labour (if at all), and where can be rendered sacrifice zones for war, resource extraction, pollution, climate destruction, and organised abandonment. In countries like the United States, Canada, Australia, and Israel, continued settler-colonial occupation and dispossession remains absolutely essential to capitalist

accumulation (Manuel 2017). Racialised expropriation has certainly evolved in character but it's still far from transcended.

The other three main chapters clearly and convincingly demonstrate this ongoing relevance of the “ex/ex” framework, including its continually deeply racialised quality (such as the “global care chains” [p.70] of poor women from the Global South migrating for low-wage and deeply exploitative social reproductive labour). These chapters also work to expand the specific centrality of financialisation and debt, through which “capital now cannibalizes labor, disciplines states, transfers wealth from periphery to core, and sucks value from households, families, communities, and nature” (p.68).

The chapter on the state attends to this especially well. Fraser outlines how Bretton Woods-era capital controls had allowed for core states to achieve some semblance of relative autonomy and use public powers to “forestall or mitigate crisis” (p.126). However, their gradual replacement by unaccountable global financial institutions, transnational governance structures, and central banks greatly ratcheted up the power of debt, undercutting state capacities and largely “disabling a critical tool of crisis management” (p.129). Although mentioned in passing, this argument could have greatly benefited from a dedicated section on the crucial function of racist state repression—policing, prisons, borders, militaries—to kill and contain mostly racialised peoples rendered “surplus” by capital (Gilmore 2022; Kaba and Ritchie 2022). As has been witnessed throughout the world in recent years, such brutal violence and repression has also severely “cannibalised” the very legitimacy of the state for many people.

Small sections of *Cannibal Capitalism* feel somewhat rushed or underdeveloped. At points, Fraser indulges in fairly shaky theoretical efforts, such as the confusing attempt to develop a new concept of “Nature I”, “Nature II”, and “Nature III” (p.95), with no reference at all to Neil Smith's (2008) foundational writings on “first nature” and “second nature”. She also responds to the diverse and complex literature of “degrowth” (Ajl 2021; Schmelzer et al. 2022) with crude caricaturing—an unfortunately common trend on the left, despite even

acknowledging that socialism “must deinstitutionalize the growth imperative hardwired into capitalist society” (p.154).

There are also two peculiar mentions of far-right white workers as having “legitimate grievances”, caveated as “which come out in one way or another—as well they should” (p.50) and “however wrongly interpreted and misdirected” (p.138). This fairly textbook “left populist” or “progressive populist” assertion vastly underestimates the deep-seated white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, anti-migrant hatred, and many other violences motivating such far-right politics (Martínez 2022). Although only constituting a few sentences in an entire book, this kind of claim is concerning in the context of the aforementioned conclusion that capitalism is supposedly no longer necessarily racist, and risks downplaying the still-urgent necessity for dedicated struggles against specific oppressions in the name of “meeting people where they’re at” or building a “big tent” movement.

With all of that said, Fraser’s book is a valuable contribution to Marxist debates on many key issues that have often remained ignored and undertheorised. Her conclusion is especially deserving of serious consideration, calling for a socialist transformation of not only labour and production but its “background conditions of possibility” (p.142) that constitutes capitalism as an “institutionalized societal order”. This itself requires a process of “redomainsing”, Fraser argues, with the ultimate aim of a socialist society being to “replenish, repair, or replace all the wealth it uses up in production and reproduction” (p.153).

Little time is spent on the political forms or processes that this would require—such as revolutionary political parties, coalitions of social movements, or networks of direct action and mutual aid—or how to ensure that such “boundary struggles” are genuinely radical in trajectory and avoid incorporation into capitalist reformism. However, such debates are likely better suited for on-the-ground organising; Fraser’s book helps to synthesise and clarify the still-inextricable relations of capitalism with racism, social reproduction, ecologies, and the state, expanding both our understanding of the mode of (re)production and opportunities for resistance—many of which, we should now be able to discern, are already well underway.

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December 2022