

A Feminist Critique of Capitalism as a Theory of Solidarity?

REPORT ON NANCY FRASER'S JAN PATOČKA MEMORIAL LECTURE 2013. BY EWA MAJEWSKA

The current sense of crisis—economic, ecological, political, social—has prompted many critical theorists to revisit the problem of capitalism. In her Patočka Memorial Lecture, held at the Museum of Applied Arts (MAK) on November 7, 2013, Nancy Fraser proposed a rethinking of the political agency of capitalism. Entitled *Crisis, Critique, Capitalism: A Framework for the 21st Century*, Fraser's socialist feminist analysis reconsidered the critical and political potential of non-commodified areas of life, such as intimate relations, nature and care. Referring to Jan Patočka's idea of the "solidarity of the shaken", she explored the potential for common ground between people "shaken" by political and economic upheaval, including those as different as a phenomenologist and a Marxist feminist. Below, the ideas developed in Fraser's lecture are placed in the wider context of her theoretical work.

Capitalism and Crisis

The Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski opened his *magnum opus* on Marxism, published in the late 1970s, with an oft-quoted sentence: "Marx was a German philosopher." It was a multilayered declaration of sentiments shaped by the Polish context, in which Marx had been subjected to serious misunderstandings, both by his official supporters, the apparatchiks of the communist state, and by his enemies, for whom Marx was merely a bad economist used by his followers to legitimize the wrongs of the Soviet system. Kołakowski's contribution was to allow philosophical analysis of an author perceived among certain generations of eastern European authors and politicians, regardless of their position towards communism in general and state socialism in particular, as an economist or political polemist. Regardless of how we read Marx today, the ability to see philosophical content in the thought of those who represent definitive political positions, who engage in debates on capitalism and crisis, and who offer alternatives, even if utopian, remains inspiring, after all the declared "ends" of politics, philosophy and culture.

What is Critical Theory Today?

In this sense, the American Nancy Fraser could also be called "a German philosopher". Her lecture accentuated some of the crucial and well-known elements of German philosophy. Broadly emphasizing the fundamental character of cri-



Crisis, Critique, Capitalism—Patočka Memorial Lecture by Nancy Fraser 2013

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tique, utopia and social justice, the distinction between marketized and non-marketized aspects of human existence and the appeal to capitalism's beyond were more concrete elements connecting the topic of the lecture with a long line of German thought. Fraser's analysis of the dialectic between productive labor fully colonized by neoliberal markets, on the one hand, and affective labor and subject formation by means of households, public institutions and the private sector, on the other, invokes the analysis of *Sittlichkeit* in both Kant and Hegel. The presumption that the current state of affairs can be overcome was a clear reference of the idea of freedom, which has preoccupied German philosophy for over two hundred years.

The Resistance of Non-Commodified Spheres of Life

In her Vienna lecture, Fraser emphasized that a good theory of the crisis of capitalism should combine a critical, Marxist analysis with feminist insights concerning reproduction, ecology and political power. Like the proletariat in Marx's theory, the non-commodified zones of affective labor "do not merely mir-

ror the commodified zones, but rather embody grammars of their own". For Fraser, capitalism is more than the economy and should be seen as an institutional order. This post-Weberian perspective allows an analysis of the role of the law within capitalism, so often overlooked in the Marxist tradition and so carefully analyzed by Jürgen Habermas and scholars associated with critical legal studies. Laws protecting property and the stability of contracts preserve individual liberties but are used to limit social struggle and exploit workers, thus sharpening social divides and enabling the accumulation of capital. Fraser emphasized the necessity of a critical approach to law, which recognizes it as means of recognition while relativizing its significance.

Towards a Feminist Critical Theory of Resistance

At the same time, I would like to suggest that Nancy Fraser is predominantly a feminist scholar. Her emphasis on gender and its constitutive role in the division between capitalist production and its enabling conditions—the non-commodified sectors of reproduction,

both in the human realm and in the realm of nature or the non-human—clearly mark her position as feminist. However, and this should be stressed, Fraser's analysis of reproductive labor not only draws attention to its downsides, but also and predominantly to its potential as a zone of resistance and change. Here she differs from feminist scholars who speak either of the complete commodification of women (Luce Irigaray) or of affective labor (Arlie Hochschild). Moreover, while Black feminists and socialist feminists have recognized the potentials of reproductive labor, they have emphasized the necessity of overcoming the division between "production" and "reproduction", treating both aspects as elements of a single moment of exploitation, and thus as targets of a single struggle. In the double-system theory developed by Fraser in her debates with Axel Honneth over recognition and redistribution, she considered two systems of oppression—gender and capital; now, she proposes a "multi-strand" critique that embraces further factors of oppression.

A Critical Subsumption of the Feminist "We"

Another possible disagreement between Fraser and other feminists, including poststructuralist and postcolonial thinkers, is the issue of the undifferentiated, unproblematized, monolithic feminist "we" applied throughout the Vienna lecture and in her texts published in *The Guardian* and other publications last year. The feminist debate over the subject of oppression is long and complicated and I refer only to the observation of the Marxist feminist Gayatri Spivak, who argued in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* that the poststructuralist premise of dismantling the (European) subject often leads to its reinstatement as general Subject. According to Spivak, certain feminist critiques and supposedly anti-authoritarian theories reiterate Eurocentric presumptions while claiming to deconstruct them. This argument, an expression of doubt concerning

the position of the critical subject, was promptly addressed by Fraser in the opening section of her lecture.

Toward the "Solidarity of the Shaken"

How did Fraser's lecture, a clear tribute to the German philosophical tradition, connect with Jan Patočka, the Czech philosopher and prominent member of the anticommunist opposition of the 1960s and 1970s? Fraser addressed this question at the start of her lecture, giving a truly inspiring demonstration of her ability to connect with a representative of a different philosophical tradition, namely phenomenology, and with a different political tradition, liberalism. She also—and for many of her listeners this proved the most valuable part of her lecture—read Patočka's work in a way that Friedrich Nietzsche once called "modern", displaying not archivist piety and heroic praise but interest in the contemporariness of the subject. In this way, Patočka's reference to the "solidarity of the shaken" became a response to contemporary crisis, in which global upheavals eradicate stability, forcing alienated individuals to search for community—one that cannot be built on sameness, but must proceed in a reflexive, mediated fashion.

For Fraser, the idea of the "solidarity of the shaken" was a way of connecting at the moment of a transformation of the global order. Detached contemplation of imminent catastrophe combined with uncritical preservation of one's privilege is one possible reaction to the fact that, as Fraser put it, "capitalism's orientation to endless accumulation threatens to erode its own conditions of possibility". This reaction, so popular in recent European theory, can be countered with another, more responsible one: to work on a theoretical and practical realization of the "solidarity of the shaken". This encompasses both critical analysis of capitalism and the utopia which, as Theodor Adorno often emphasized, allows thinking as such. ◀

Jan Patočka Memorial Lectures

Since its foundation in 1982, the IWM has promoted the work of Czech philosopher and human rights activist Jan Patočka (1907–1977). Since 1987, the Institute regularly organizes lectures in his memory, a selection of which has been published in German by Passagen Verlag, Vienna.

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