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**Nancy Fraser, "Fortunes of Feminism. From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis". London-New York: Verso, 2013, 248 pp.**

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## Book Review

**Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism. From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*. London-New York: Verso, 2013, 248 pp.**

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Nancy Fraser's book is a collection of essays written from 1985 to 2010 by the American socialist feminist philosopher and critical theorist. It is a rich and complex text that aims at dissecting the "drama in three acts" that according to the author is the thread of second-wave feminism. If act one is the moment when the feminist movement joined radical movements to transform society through uncovering gender injustice and capitalism's androcentrism, in act two Fraser highlights with regret a switch from redistribution to recognition and difference and a shift to identity politics that risk to support neoliberalism in its efforts to build a free market society. In act three, still unfolding, the problem of justice is reframed and the relationships between a feminist movement meant to be radical and the changes in act in present times has the potential to open new unpredictable scenarios.

This is an important contribution because it provides a clear frame to rethink issues related to labour, emancipation, identity, rights claims at the core of political demands of justice in the contemporary context of neoliberalism. The historical phases of the recent feminist movement are retraced through its critical tangles in a constant debate with political theory.

The "three acts" correspond to the three sections that make up the book. The first part of the book - *Feminist insurgent: radicalizing Critique in the Era of Social Democracy* - includes essays written between 1984 and 1994 where Fraser discusses key issues for a radical rethinking of feminism's contribution to critical theory. In particular, the analysis of Habermas's social theory on communicative action (ch. 1) is a stinging critic of the inability of the philosopher to realize the centrality of gender and to consider "communicative ethics" as a contingently evolved and historically specific possibility. The distinction between material paid reproduction and symbolic reproduction (women's unpaid activities) is unveiled in its ideological component, as is the distinction between system-integrated action contexts (such as the capitalist economic system) and socially integrated action context epitomized by the modern, restricted, nuclear family. The gender blindness of Habermas's view is brought back to the theorization of a battle line between system and lifeworld institutions. Fraser sharply focuses on households as loci of exchange services, labor, cash, as well as coercion and violence and on the great mistake represented by the restriction of the term "power" to bureaucratic contexts.

In the analysis of the politics of need (ch. 2) and the historically stratified discourse of dependency (ch. 3) as distinctive marks of late capitalist political culture, Fraser - inspired by Foucault - considers the economic political domain as cultural classifications and ideological labels rather than self-evident structure. The focus is on the recent process of reprivatizing the social dimension and the role of expert discourses that ends up in divorcing needs and dependency from rights claims. Fraser identifies a rising stigmatizing view of dependency as feminized and racialized deviancy, where claimant's behavior and

“culture” are labeled as problematic. In her discussion of family wage in postindustrial capitalism (ch. 4), the philosopher aims at dismantling the opposition between breadwinning and caregiving, by proposing a model of gender justice based on wage-earning, caregiving, community activism and political participation. In this respect, achieving gender justice in a postindustrial era means to radically deconstruct gender, avoiding the risk that the feminist critique of family wage is reconducted within flexible capitalism politics.

The second part of the book [*Feminism Tamed: from Redistribution to Recognition in the Age of Identity*] deals with the debate on the politics of recognition in an open invite to critically rethink the versions of discourse theory of Lacan’s origins on gender identity. In a critique of Kristeva’s work (ch. 5) and in dialogue with Butler, Fraser underlines the need to avoid the reference to a monolithic all-pervasive “symbolic order” and focuses instead on historically and socially produced orders, as well as feminist political practices. In chapter 6 the author discusses identity politics and argues that focusing on recognition can turn feminism into a position functional to hegemonic aggressive US-led neoliberalism. The dialogue with Butler (ch. 7) provides an account of the similarities between the two philosophers and the frictions between different interpretations of what constitutes the legacy of Marxism, the materialist dimension, and the nature of contemporary capitalism. In particular the author answers to Butler’s critique on the redistribution/recognition framework and the misunderstandings of the material/cultural-symbolic distinction. The dispute is mainly on the role of the regulation of sexuality as central to the functioning of the capitalist economic system, an issue in which what counts as “economic” is crucial: according to Fraser there is no evidence that contemporary capitalism requires heterosexism.

These arguments are reworked in an essay from 2005 (ch. 8) in the third part of the book [*Feminist Resurgent? Confronting Capitalists Crisis in the Neoliberal Era*] in which a new political dimension of representation is added to the distribution/recognition model in the theory of justice. Matter of social belonging - the frame that makes possible the claim for redistribution and recognition - representation emerges as a crucial dimension to the processes of contestations. The last two essays (ch. 9 and 10) are part of the more recent Fraser’s thinking for a new path to feminist claims and a democratic theory of justice. In chapter 9, “*Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History*” - an elaboration of a keynote lecture presented in Italy at the Cortona Colloquium on Gender and Citizenship in 2008 - Fraser places second-wave feminism within specific historical phases of capitalism. The “disturbing convergence” of some feminist claims with the demands of rising post-Fordist capitalism emerges from her analysis. It is significant that the vast change in attitudes on critical issues (inequal pay, harrassment, trafficking) raised by the feminist movement has not led to substantial structural institutional changes. It is not only a question of fulfilling the change in the institutional setting, but, as Fraser suggests, a more complex intertwined relationship between cultural attitudes borne out from feminism and the legitimation of social transformations towards neoliberal capitalism. Setting the emerging of second-wave feminism within the context of state-organized capitalism of the postwar era makes the movement claims historically specific. During the rise of neoliberalism the unveiling of sexism and androcentrism, the stances against the narrow identification of injustice with class maldistribution, the critique of the family wage model, are resignified into cultural terms. This process has produced a decoupling

from a critique of capitalism, making these claims available for the narrative of a free, self-fashioning and, needless to say, masculinist individual, central to the new spirit of neoliberalism. The critique of traditional authority and emancipation claims must be understood in their complexity in order to avoid shifts to neoliberal use. In the last essay (ch. 10) Fraser refers to Polanyi's theoretical framework through the lens of social reproduction. Underling the ways in which embedded markets have been sites of domination, the author identifies the possibility to rethink the concept of capitalist crisis avoiding not only reductive economism but also a romanticized view of "society." Emancipation claims as non-domination are viewed as the "missing third" between marketization and social protection, a third force that eschews Polanyi's dualistic frame, too much focused on disintegrative effects of marketization on the one hand and incapable to view domination effects of social protection on the other.

Through a theoretical political approach, *Fortunes of Feminism* provides a clear-cut historical and theoretical account of what second-wave feminism has been at its beginnings, has recently become, and has the potential of becoming. The author's perspective highlights key issues on feminist theories and politics in the intersection of multiple axes of social differentiation, gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexuality in their ambivalence and conundrums. What is particularly remarkable is the centrality given to the role of social movements in politicizing needs and the conflicts in interpretations, along with the constant interplay between social demands and welfare administration. Fraser favors a democratic and egalitarian social change, where -in the contemporary context in which welfare dependency is reinterpreted as a postindustrial pathology- need and dependency become central keywords and where the meaning of social experience is negotiated: as the author reminds us, no process of repression has gone uncontested.

The rejection of dependency as an individual trait along with the gender coded opposition between dependence and independence, the focus on social relations of subordination, together with the analysis of struggles against androcentric value hierarchies contribute to composing a complex picture where Fraser provides a critique of ideology in the form of a critical politics of semantics. By proposing an approach to

"navigate safely between the twin shoals of essentialism and nominalism, between reifying women's social identities under stereotypes of femininity, on the one hand and dissolving them into sheer nullity and oblivion, on the other" [p. 157],

the philosopher suggests a new alliance between feminist movements and social protection, advocating for a Universal Caregiver model.

If the invite to escape the liason dangereuse with flexible capitalism insists on the possibility to rethink radical democratic practices beyond territorial state, this reference to regulatory state powers might sound somewhat nostalgic. Fraser's approach can meet and be enriched on the one hand by queer and anti-racist critical politics that aim to disentangle biopower from biopolitics in the contemporary conjunction, and on the other

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by radical reflection on new forms of organization of work, precarity and immaterial labour in the neoliberal condition.

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