

CONNECTING THE DOTS AND UTOPIA: HOW DO WE WIN THE OUROBOROS?

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ABSTRACT

In this contribution I highlight some merits of Nancy Fraser's analysis of capitalism as a complex social order. Then, I briefly consider her proposal concerning the possible ways out of the contradictions of capitalism, raising the question of how to think about the practices that can change the present domination of the capitalist systems. Finally, I sketch the outline of a utopian way of thinking that takes the fragment as its starting point and aims at a comprehensive transformation.

KEYWORDS

Socialism, Utopia, Critical Theory, Capitalism, Nancy Fraser

1. BEYOND STRUCTURE AND SUPERSTRUCTURE

Nancy Fraser has convincingly argued in various books and articles that capitalism is a societal order where the economic features of the system are based on non-economic dimensions of exploitation in the fields of social reproduction, racialized expropriation, political representation, and environmental consumption. Her analysis shows that the non-economic dimensions are necessary for capitalism to work: they are structural features of the capitalist system. In her conversation-book with Rahel Jaeggi, *Capitalism. A Conversation in Critical Theory*, Fraser adopts a telling cinematic metaphor¹: in capitalism, the economic story – a story of exploitation – is in the foreground, while the social story – a story of expropriation – is in the background. Her suggestion is that we should bring the background story to the fore, so that it becomes clear that capitalism is first of all a deliberate set of actions that *create* (by way of an original expropriation) a certain social order, and not just a “natural fact” determined by the so-called “laws of economics”. The relations between these dimensions are kept in order by a series of regulations and

¹ Fraser, N., Jaeggi, R. 2018. *Capitalism. A Conversation in Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press Ltd.

dynamics that block any attempt to change the existing *status quo*. In this respect, Fraser's analysis – explicitly based on Karl Marx's first book of the *Capital*² – resumes and deepens the critical analysis offered by the authors of the Frankfurt School, in particular some ideas that can be found in Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the “cultural industry”³ and most of all the intuitions that were the bulk of Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*⁴. While the capitalist order tends to conceal the conflicts, these dimensions create frictions and crises both in themselves and in their relationship with the economic dimension. Capitalism creates its crises, but many of them remain under track, since they are attributed to the non-economic sphere of society, while the economy is conceived of as “value-free” and *therefore* completely devoid of responsibility for social disorders. In this sense, the articulation of the capitalist order is apt to “sterilize” many of its conflicts thanks to its ability to remove some of its crises to areas where capitalism is supposedly absent. The “division of labor” that capitalism creates within society – as Karl Polany has shown in *The Great Transformation*⁵ – helps to keep the crises away from the “core business” of economic capitalism. This explanation is helpful to understand the ability of capitalism to avoid crashing: the fault is always with the non-economic dimension (politics, families, social conflicts, consumption behaviors), and a technocratic-economic solution is always proposed as a way out of the crisis. Fraser's analysis is an improvement on Marxist analyses since it clarifies the complex relation between economic and non-economic dimensions of capitalism: rather than a juxtaposition in terms of “structure” and “superstructure”, Fraser elaborates a vision of capitalism that sees the intertwining of the economic and the social dimensions, so that there is no order of “priority” among the two. The history of capitalism shows that the economic structure has constantly used the social superstructure as the source of its ability to function effectively and not only as a by-product of its activity⁶.

² Marx, K. 2010. *Capital*. 3 voll. Trans. S. Moore, E. Aveling, in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: Collected Works*, Vol. XXXV, London: Lawrence & Wishart.

³ Horkheimer, M., Adorno T.W. 2002. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. E. Jephcott, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

⁴ Marcuse, H. 1991, *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston: Beacon Press.

⁵ Polany, K. 2001. *The Great Transformation. The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston: Beacon Press.

⁶ Fraser, N., Jaeggi, R. 2018. *Capitalism*. Cit., Ch. 2.

2. THE OUROBOROS

In her recent *Cannibal Capitalism*⁷, Fraser takes her analysis one step further: capitalism is not just *using* the social dimensions on which it thrives to sustain itself or to justify its dominion. Actually, capitalism is devouring the political, social, and environmental bases of life – which are the necessary ground of any possible economic and social order – so that the full, contorted circle of its development is in the end self-cannibalizing. Capitalism is essentially omnivore, but in a way that does not bring to flourishing, even for itself, but rather to a self-consumption that is in fact a form of autophagy.

Fraser shows that there are four areas in which capitalism devours the sources of social life to produce a self-consummating order. First, the area of racialized work, where the dynamics of expropriation that originated the accumulation on which capitalism is based are brought forward incessantly, at the damage of groups of people that are treated as workforce and relegated at the periphery of society. «The subjection of those whom capital *expropriates* is a hidden condition of possibility for the freedom of those whom it *exploits*»⁸. These groups are usually racialized, so Fraser argues that capitalism is intrinsically, even if not necessarily, racist. Second, capitalism is a care guzzler: «Our system is sapping energies needed to tend to families, maintain households, sustain communities, nourish friendships, build political networks, and forge solidarities»⁹. Social reproduction is relegated outside the market, but it is constantly depredated in terms of energy, time, and commitment. Feminist movements have sought to revert this situation, but they have been entangled in the exploitation of time that blocks any counter-initiative. The dimension of time should be underestimated: if productive work consumes all the time of individuals and families, there is literally no space for critical citizenship.

Third, capitalism «drives global warming non-accidentally, by virtue of its very structure»¹⁰. The way in which capitalism appropriates natural resources while imposing the cost of pollution to the “lower” layers of society is intrinsic to the nature and structure of capitalism itself. Ecologism should, Fraser argues, move from a single-issue perspective to a systematic, trans-environmental, and anti-capitalist one, attacking the relationship that capitalism establishes between economy and nature: a relationship of relentless consumption. Fourth, Fraser argues that «Not just neoliberalism, but *capitalism*, is prone to political crisis and inimical to democracy»¹¹. The capital needs a relatively stable political order to expand its commerce and its revenues, but «capital’s drive to endless accumulation

⁷ Fraser, N. 2022. *Cannibal Capitalism. How Our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet – and What We Can Do about It*. London-New York: Verso.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 33-34.

⁹ Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 79.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 117.

tends over time to destabilize the very public powers on which it depends»¹². Requiring a complete separation between economics and politics, while at the same time exploiting the political order, capitalism (especially, but not only, in its neoliberal version) claims more and more autonomy from any form of social regulation, thereby creating the bases of radical social inequality and therefore of social discontent. This is a recurrent dynamic within capitalist societies.

This analysis is extremely rich and sensitive: it offers the debate good reasons to be quite radical in the critique of capitalist societies, since in addition to patent issues of justice and equality, capitalism appears to be a self-defeating system for political communities, at least in the long run. There is no space here to develop an assessment of Fraser's analysis: I think there is enough to consider it a powerful comprehensive view that enables further questions to be asked about how we should face the moral and political issues that capitalism raises in our societies. What I am interested here is rather asking about the possible strategies that ethical and social thought can adopt to sketch some potential alternatives to the *status quo*. Fraser offers such a sketch in the last chapter of *Cannibal Capitalism*, arguing for a reformulation of socialism as an alternative to capitalism. As Fraser says, «We need an expanded conception of socialism [...] we can no longer understand socialism as an alternative economic system»¹³. Clearly, not doing that would actually concede the point that economy is separated from ethics and politics, and that is exactly the essential “epistemological” argument that liberal thought would use against the alternatives. Capitalism as an economic system has clearly won over “real socialist” systems. According to Fraser, «a desirable alternative to [capitalism] must do more than socialize ownership of the means of production. [...] it must also transform production's relation to its background conditions of possibility»¹⁴.

The point is that liberal democracies – which are historically bound in a complex and contradictory relationship with capitalist economy – when compared with the authoritarian, illiberal and frankly dystopian “real socialist” societies of the past and most of all of the present¹⁵, seem to offer at least some protection of human rights, some reciprocal control between state powers (legal, executive, legislative) and some dynamics that allow people sometimes to improve their lives. Modernity *is not* capitalism and there are good reasons to ask ourselves how to retain the political and ethical advances brought about by the values of Enlightenment in a social system that does not blatantly contradict them (as in fact capitalism does). After all, Fraser says, socialism «should not be a ‘mere ought’, or utopian dream [...] it

¹² Ibid., p. 119.

¹³ Ibid., p. 141.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 142.

¹⁵ It is quite obvious that Russia and China, for example, are definitely not “socialist” at present. They are examples of state capitalism with a growing tendency to nationalism and imperialist foreign politics. The so-called “Western liberal democracies” do show some of these traits as well. So, there seems to be no “socialism” at all, at least in the understanding proposed by Fraser in her book.

encapsulates real, historically emergent possibilities: potentials for human freedom, well-being, and happiness that capitalism has brought within reach but cannot actualize»¹⁶. A “critical theory” perspective should try to offer ideas to bring these potentials toward an actualization, otherwise the very notion of “critique” would fall into a mere unconstructive form of criticism without hope¹⁷.

3. STRATEGIES FOR TRANSFORMATION

One question that arises is the following: if the system works as a strictly interconnected whole, how can we imagine transforming it? Or should we just concentrate on strategies to knock it over? Fraser’s analysis argues that capitalism is intrinsically connected to those features that we are willing to change completely, although, for example, in the topic of racism, Fraser says that capitalism is structurally but not intrinsically racist, as we have seen. Yet, if the societal order is based on the interaction of the economic and non-economic dimensions, how can we separate its parts both theoretically and in practice? Fraser connects all the dots of capitalism into a one coherent picture, but while connecting the dots helps to see the whole picture, should not we try to think that the dots can be moved from one position to another individually? Or should we exclusively strive to change the picture altogether?

We go back to an old question in the socialist and Marxist tradition: should we work for a revolutionary, all-or-nothing-at-all, upheaval or should we try a process of reformation of the system - so to say, dot by dot? There is some fluctuation in Fraser’s analysis on this point: she stresses that at every joint in the different kinds of practices (economic, domesticated, political, gendered, racialized) there are tensions and contradictions and although she tends to connect all of them in a single great contradiction, yet she allows for the tensions to be detected at their own level. Single contradictions emerge even if the general perspective stays in the background. The question is: is there a possibility to face the contradictions at their level without waiting for the general contradiction to explode? Can we imagine an alternative to specific contradictions and obtain results that would probably never come if we only aimed at the general one?

Fraser has a very general idea of what we should look for, as a picture of a whole that does not say how to generate transformations at each level. And that idea is a quite convincing one: «No markets at the top, no markets at the bottom, but possibly some markets in the in-between»¹⁸. To put it bluntly: is this solution an agenda for a (radically) reformist or a (radically) revolutionary perspective? The first

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 143.

¹⁷ I have tried to elaborate this notion of critique in Mordacci, R. 2023. *Critica e utopia. Da Kant a Francoforte*. Roma: Castelvecchi.

¹⁸ Fraser, N. 2022. *Cannibal Capitalism*. Cit., pp. 155-156.

alternative would need to accept the idea that changes in the capitalist system may occur by way of local transformations and “social experiments” such as those envisaged by Axel Honneth in his *The Idea of Socialism*¹⁹. This does not seem the perspective suggested by Fraser’s outlook. And yet, some resources in the socialist tradition might be explored again to see whether *multiple* transformations can yield some more general change, exactly *because* capitalism is not just an economical dynamic but a deeply knotted social system.

In the remaining of this paper, I just try to very briefly sketch some arguments suggesting that an approach based on “fragments” of revolutionary practice might introduce systemic mutations that modify the general picture. The fragments are the dots in Fraser’s image: one way to think about transformative practices is to identify the contradictions punctually, in their precise spot and articulation. And then thinking the opposite and acting the opposite. This is what I call utopian thinking and acting.

4. UTOPIAN THINKING, REFORMED

Herbert Marcuse, in a conference held in 1967, defined utopia as the thought of a just order that is not practicable *only* because the conditions of practicability are not at present available in society. And he suggested that «today the notion of the end of utopia implies the necessity of at least discussing a new definition of socialism»²⁰. But he also said that when the social conditions needed for utopian changes come up, in periods of radical change in society, then utopia is not unrealistic anymore and becomes a historical *opportunity*²¹. Now, we do not need to think about those conditions as appearing all together all at once. They have to be taken locally, and the method to appropriately identify them must be a dialectical method, that is: the point is to highlight local and specific contradictions that cannot be tolerated and that *therefore* offer the possibility of raising transformative energies that would be too difficult to connect to a *general* contradiction that is often not perceived by the diverse social forces. My contention, then, is concerning the hypothesis that utopian ideas can be practicable in some areas while a complete overturn of the societal order remains – at least presently – unavailable. A fragmented utopian thinking and practice seems in this perspective to be *more realistic* than an integral utopia, which also presents some risks of imagining too perfect a society.

¹⁹ Honneth, A. 2018. *The Idea of Socialism. Towards a Renewal*. London, Wiley and Sons.

²⁰ Marcuse, H. 1970. «The End of Utopia» in: *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia*; trans. J. Shapiro and S. Weber, Boston: Beacon, pp. 62-81, p. 62.

²¹ As Jürgen Habermas noted, «Marcuse did not, in contrast to Adorno, only encircle the ineffable; he made straight appeals to future alternatives». Habermas, J. 1988, «Psychic Thermidor and the Rebirth of Rebellious Subjectivity» in Pippin, R., Feenberg, A., Webel C.P. (eds.). *Marcuse. Critical Theory and the Promise of Utopia*. London: Macmillan, pp. 3-12, p. 3.

The practice of utopian thinking can be divided into four steps²²: 1. Critical analysis of the general structure of society, in realistic terms and taking into account the powers active in the situation. This is something that the general overview offered by *Cannibal Capitalism* does in an excellent way. 2. Identification of the punctual and precise contradictions that characterize the different fields of action in the social context. Again, this is something that *Cannibal Capitalism* does very sensibly, with the ability to indicate specific points and causes of crisis in the societal order dominated by capitalism. 3. Imagination of alternative practices derived from the overturn of the specific contradictions identified. Much like Thomas More did in *Utopia*, if the problem is the appropriation of the land by the landlords to produce wool for commerce, then the alternative is to imagine a society in which the land is non privately owned, and the production is a common endeavor for the benefit of all. In a complex society like the present one, this means identifying alternatives for single portions of activities, fragments of the whole that can be overturned, generating a modification of the structure by way of the modification of the junctions. Utopian thinking does not proceed by the fantasy of a totality, but from the concrete and realistic imagination of alternatives to specific patterns of action. This “imagination by fragments” generates a modification of the whole structure, but step by step rather than on the whole. 4. Designing the transition, that is, imagining how the alternative practice can be brought into being by way of transformative practices that generate radical changes. One example is the set of practices that can put a limit to the consumption and pollution of the environment: single sets of practices (mobility, carbon-neutral buildings, green energy) can generate a different structure of a whole arrangement of societal organization.

This perspective is at the same time reformist and radical, since the dynamics spring from the identification of specific contradictions in the system. No system can remain unaltered if its joints change their positions or are overturned in a radically different practice. In this sense, the transformation of the system is an ongoing process that critical analysis never ceases to keep under scrutiny.

It goes without saying that utopian proposals are only a part of the resources that emancipatory critique and politics can use. However, utopian thought has a fundamental function in the constitution of a critical consciousness: “Historical experience does not crystallize only in the form of reality, it also settles in its utopian consciousness”.²³ Utopian critique, if on the one hand is intertwined with other forms of critique especially in the analysis of the existing and its tensions, on the other hand is an irreplaceable tool to try to *get out of* the contradictions detected. Without this effort, the waiting for a general contradiction to emerge and to enable all the strands of social distress to converge will let capitalism all the time to adapt and to sterilize the local contradictions. The timing of a prompt enactment of an

²² A development of this perspective can be found in my *Critica e utopia*. Cit., ch. 6.

²³ Bauman, Z. (1976). *Socialism. The Active Utopia*. Teaneck (NJ): Holmes & Meier, p. 157.

alternative practice is paramount, and the fact of starting to change things from a fragment does not mean that the general contradiction is not in sight.

The project of a counter-hegemonic culture should feed on the ability to *imagine alternatives* starting from the accurate detection of existing contradictions. It is necessary to free common sense from the distorted understanding of what a utopia is: the history of the effects of the concept has badly served its inventor and the clear contents of that humanistic project, born at the dawn of modernity from the clear detection of an incipient economic and social disaster. Within the socialist tradition, the radical rejection of utopian socialism made by Marx and Engels in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* and in *The Development of Socialism from Utopia to Science* has long been understood as a veto against any form of utopian thinking. And yet, the idea of utopia has maintained a strong attractiveness (think about the use of it made by Ernst Bloch in *The Principle of Hope*²⁴), it has carved out the role of keeping alive the sense of the normative, or of what is felt as right, just when the real conditions most strongly deny it.

The notion of utopian critique aims to make clearer the dual character of utopian thought: its being based on a critical analysis of the present, aimed at detecting the contradictions within it; and its drawing from the latter the content to be overturned into a proposal not only conceptually thought of but concretely imagined in its operation, with the connections necessary to make it a possible and practicable proposal, albeit under conditions that will not be easily given.

This critique does not presuppose a linear course of history, nor a messianic dimension capable of redeeming its course in a single event. Utopian critique has a progressive, but not necessary, character. It judges historical events on the basis of a clear transcendental principle, that of the non-contradiction of freedom, which is however to be thought of in the concrete of historical events. Every utopia aims to overcome the contradictions of the present time; the realization of a utopian fragment can well generate other contradictions, but it is precisely from here that a further possible radical transformation can start.

²⁴ Bloch, E. 1995. *The Principle of Hope*. Trans. N. Plaice, S. Plaice, Boston: MIT Press.