

Racialized and Gendered Capitalism: an interview with Nancy Fraser¹

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Nancy Fraser is an American philosopher, professor at the New School for Social Research, in New York. Author of numerous works, which discuss theory of justice, capitalism, crisis, neoliberalism, social reproduction, racism, among other topics, Fraser is an important exponent of socialist feminism and of critical theory. Among the most recent published books are *Capitalism in Debates* (2018), in which Rahel Jaeggi is a co-author, *Feminism for the 99%* (2017), which she co-authored with Cinzia Arruzza and Tithi Bhattacharya - both published in Brazil by Editora Boitempo, in 2020 and 2019, respectively - and, the recently published *Cannibal Capitalism* (2022), which has not yet been Portuguese translation.

Throughout the interview, conducted virtually on August 19th, 2022, some questions about the author's recent work were addressed. In dialogue with the interviewer's research, Fraser comments on the racialized and gendered characteristics of capitalism, social struggles and resistance to expropriation, highlighting the mobilization of indigenous peoples in Brazil. In addition to being very accessible, assertive and clear, Fraser is brilliant in this interview, shared in full below.

Kena Chaves (KC): Professor Nancy Fraser, in your work, you delve into the relationship between capitalism, gender oppression and racism. To start off, I'd like to ask a question that you've discussed in the last years: is capitalism necessarily racist and necessarily gendered?

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Nancy Fraser: It's a great and somewhat complicated question. I believe that there's no question that, historically, capitalism has always been entangled with sexism and gender oppression, with race and racism and, for that matter, with imperialism, which in turn is closely connected to racism. And this is a deep connection, in all cases. It's got a structural basis in the history of capitalism, because capitalism emerged by splitting off one arena of social life, one form of social activity, that it called economic, and it turned it over to a profit-oriented practice of work and accumulation. The result was to leave behind other activities and groups of people who were not conscripted into this profit-oriented production, in the economic sphere. It left behind people whose activities involved caring for, nurturing, producing or reproducing human beings and the natural habitat in which their communities were located. And, a lot of people who were brought into the system, but not as free proletarians, and rather as either outright enslaved, or semi-free, but dependent populations whose labor was used by the system to generate profit, but who did not have the status of free exploited workers. That group of people was racialized; the group who nurtured and cared for human beings was gendered; and, these divisions became very central and very definitive of what capitalism was. It turned out that all of that supposedly highly productive and profitable work that was going on in commodity production really rested on, and was dependent upon, this racialized and gendered labor that was relegated to the background and treated as not really part of capitalism in any official sense. That's the sense in which, despite any changes in the forms of capitalism throughout its history, these divisions have remained.

It's very hard, today, to imagine a path of capitalist development that would overcome this gendered and racialized basis in its structure. I wouldn't say it's absolutely impossible to imagine that, because capitalism has surprised us before by being capable of all sorts of forms and institutional provision, so I don't think we can say for sure that this will forever be this way. But, so far, these divisions have been so fundamental, they are so deeply rooted in the design of capitalism, both historically and at present, that, as I say, it's hard to imagine a path.

I will just make two other quick points. You could say that given this structure, that as long as populations are divided between those who do so-called "reproductive work," and those who do so-called "productive work," whoever does reproductive work will be feminized, no matter what form of genitalia they have in their bodies. It's the feminization dynamic that's important here. Likewise, whoever does the forms of unfree or semi-free labor that is menial and substandard and so on, those people will be racialized irrespective of their skin tone. That suggests that the only way you could imagine overcoming racism and sexism within capitalism is if the system no longer assigned specific groups of people to care-work and substandard unfree work. If everybody did some of that work, and other work, you might still

have something of a capitalist system; it would still be a highly oppressive and unjust, and ecologically and humanely destructive system. I don't think we should try. I wouldn't put a lot of effort into trying to create a form of capitalism that isn't racist or sexist. There's no guarantee that you could succeed, and, even if you did succeed, the result, as I said, would be deeply problematic. I think the better course of action would be to try to figure out some new sort of social system that could replace it.

KC: In your expanded conception of capitalism, you argue about the contradictory relationship between economic conditions and the background or hidden conditions for accumulation – among which are the spheres of politics, social reproduction, nature and expropriation –. Is there any hierarchical logic between economic conditions and hidden conditions?

Nancy Fraser: When you say hierarchical logic, I assume that maybe what lies behind the question is a worry that this is an economic determinism model, that the economy is the main driving force, and everything else is simply instrumentalized and reflects that. And, of course, that is a familiar position in the so-called base/superstructure model, which is a familiar condition within Marxist thought. That's not the view that I want to propose. I think that there are multidirectional forms of casualties. It's true that the capitalist economy, in the narrow sense of the economy, has a very powerful built-in drive towards capital accumulation, towards the expansion of profit. And it's true that that system creates strong incentives for investors, owners and entrepreneurs to just ignore all the “non-economic damages” that their activities create: the destruction of communities, of natural ecosystems, of democratic or other public/political capacities. It's true that there are strong incentives to ignore those things and to just plunge, go-ahead, hell-or-high-water, come-what-may, to make more or more profit. But, it doesn't follow that the social actors in other “non-economic spheres” of capitalist society are just simply passive recipients of all of this. They live in more than one sphere at once. They may be workers in one part of their lives, but they are family members in another part of their lives; they might be members of communities, including the indigenous communities, and so on. Because they live in this society that is differentiated to these different arenas, they have available to them a lot of resources for acting in non-economic ways. They have values associated with family life and community life, and democratic-political life, in some cases. They have action-logics of solidarity, of mutual aid, of care for nature. These are not the same as the capitalist logics, or as the economic logics. These are also part of capitalist society. I think there is a tremendous amount of noneconomic activity that is always both going along in its own way, and also pushing back, fighting back against the intrusion of economic logic. In other words, it's not a base/superstructure model. I am putting the emphasis on the hidden conditions of the

economy in order to make a point against mainstream economic science, which just ignores all these things, and doesn't understand how dependent the economy is on the wealth of nature. On the wealth of families, indigenous communities, and racialized people, on political capacities, and so on.

KC: Could you explain more about the role of the State within this conception?

Nancy Fraser: I would say: it obviously depends on the situation, because we have a range of different kinds of States in the world, including failed States. Or, in other words, States that basically externalized large portions of the population, don't provide them any services, don't afford them any protections, and essentially, let the invading extractive industries have their way. And the State's wash their hands of it. I have the impression, not that I'm very knowledgeable, that under Bolsonaro in Brazil, you had something like this going on in relation to the Amazon. But in other places there are States that really claim to exercise sovereignty over the whole population, the whole territory. We will leave aside, for the moment, the question of migrants and all of that, which is, obviously, a very important issue.

The first thing to say is that State's supply public goods that the private sector absolutely cannot live without. They maintain roads, power grids, all forms of infrastructure, including social infrastructure. In any case, they take responsibility for educating those who will be the future workers. Business could not thrive in the absence of a lot of public goods that the market cannot supply, and what public powers must supply, but, there's always a struggle as to where the State is going to put its energy and who's going to pay for it. The big struggles over taxation: are the corporations going to pay taxes, or are they going to be let off the hook? It's essentially the working people whose taxes are paying for all of this. That's a constant struggle. Struggles over how much of the resources of the public sector are going to be put into things that benefit mainly or only business versus those that work to address climate change, work to insure health care, food security, decent housing, and so on and so forth.

I think the State is necessary to a capitalist economy. But, it's also the site of a struggle over who the main beneficiaries are going to be. Capital has a lot of advantages in this struggle. It's got a lot of money and it controls a lot of resources, and often controls the media. You could say that the ordinary working people - whichever kind of work they do, whether official laborer, informal work, care work or substandard work - have an uphill fight, but they do win some victories.

KC: In your argumentation, you emphasize the historical continuity of expropriation and the role of the State in maintaining its racialized character. You point to the expropriated as

having a lower political status in relation to the exploited. How can we frame the agency of those targeted by expropriation?

Nancy Fraser: I think expropriation is not only a matter of economics. It's not only that people's labor, their land, and their wealth is stolen from them, which it is. And, it's not only that stolen wealth is then funneled into the profit-streams of corporate capitalism and is transmuted from use values that people actually live from, to economic values that show up on corporate account books and balance sheets, and therefore become value. That's the usual way that we look at these things, and expropriation has been called super exploitation sometimes. The problem with that is that, in my view, expropriation is also a matter of politics. It's not just economics. To say that somebody is expropriated — or let's talk instead about expropriate-able, or expropriable — means that they are vulnerable. It means they don't have rights that they can actualize. They may have some rights on paper, but in reality they're not able to put these rights into practice to defend themselves. They're not able to call on states to protect them and, therefore, a lower status. That could be anything from being a chattel slave, literally being a property of someone else, to someone who on paper is a free person.

Just take examples from the US: someone who the police can shoot down with impunity in the middle of the street and nothing will happen to the police. Until the recent protests by Black Lives Matter, that has been the situation for more than a century in the United States. Maybe there are comparable situations in the *favelas*, or in remote rural areas. In other words, there are people who are really treated as full citizens and there are others who, even though they officially have papers as citizens, are not. And then we have to mention the migrants, again: there are migrants that have papers, and those who don't. But, whichever situation, migrants have a condition that has been called deportability, meaning that they don't have secure rights of residency. They can be booted out either because they're caught without the right papers or because even if they have papers they have made some trouble, maybe they have been involved in a strike or been in a protest or whatever. That's another example of political status that makes you vulnerable to expropriation. There's a deep entwinement between the economic side of expropriation and this political status side of expropriation.

You asked about agency. The fact that people are vulnerable does not mean they don't have agency. People without papers invest a lot of creativity in surviving and not getting caught and staying under the radar screen. And, including, in a country like the U.S. with citizenship by birth, you have families whose younger members are born in the U.S. and are citizens, and the older members might have come without papers. This is a very complicated situation to navigate in your daily life and people do it with tremendous creativity and agency, and with a lot of success. It's not right that they have to do it, but they do it. Then you have the fact that agency takes the form of political activism as opposed to agency in daily life, and

there I think we've all been surprised. Several years ago, I would have thought that not having papers was such a situation of vulnerability that it would be very unlikely that people would come out publicly in political movements and protest for the *sans-papiers*. The French *sans-papiers* movement was tremendous and had very broad support. Whether it succeeded in making real institutional changes is another matter. Then we have The Dreamers in the United States, and I'm sure you have versions of this in Brazil as well. There do seem to be real capacities for political activism.

KC: What are the possible weavings or points in common between the resistance of the expropriated and the exploited?

Nancy Fraser: This is an important question, because the expropriated, for the most part, are not likely to make, at least in today's form of capitalism, large-scale institutional and structural change by themselves. I would say the same for the exploited workers who do have a regularized status, who are working in the official economy and not the informal gray zones. In recent years, there's been a tremendous weakening of traditional labor movements, at least in the historical core of capitalism, the former Colonial powers, the Metropole: countries like the United States, the UK, Western European countries. Unions in those countries have been severely weakened as a result of the offshoring of production, of the relocation of industrial manufacturing to the semi-periphery. As I understand it, in at least some sectors, Brazil has benefited from this. You have a very big airline industry production and other major industrial sectors of your economy that have been able to thrive as the competitors in the richer and longer developed countries (historic core) have weakened. What I'm trying to say is that the exploited workers, although they certainly enjoy some privileges that the expropriated do not enjoy, they are not, at the moment, in a position of great political strength. They are not in a position today as they were in the 1930's, to claim to speak for all working people. Their situation lacks credibility, strength, and so on.

To this question about alliances between the expropriated and exploited, let's also add the domesticated, those who do care work whether they are also exploited or expropriated, or both. In other words, in all the major forms of work and people who have performed that work in present-day capitalism, none of them is able to make the big kind of structural change that we need by themselves. The question of whether they can find ways to unite, or at least cooperate, in pursuing a project of social transformation that would benefit them all, that is the most pressing question of our time. We are in a very deep and enormous crisis: ecological crisis, economic crisis, political crisis, care, etc. It's a dire situation, the prospects for a desirable, just, and emancipatory resolution of this crisis really depends on the kinds of alliances you're asking about. I think there's nothing more pressing than to think about this question today.

KC: In Brazil, especially during the Bolsonaro government, indigenous peoples are among the hardest hit by pressures to expropriate territories, while at the same time they are on the front lines of resistance. How to interpret or frame this situation?

Nancy Fraser: I have to preface what I'm going to say by telling you that I'm not an expert on Brazil. I know only what I read in the U.S. newspapers which is not necessarily very comprehensive. That said, I think an important question will always be: where are the possible points of connections? When we're talking about land-grabbing and illegal mining, extractivism, assaults on community, territory and ecological resources, for example, I can imagine that, off the bat, there ought to be the possibility of some alliances between environmental activists and Indigenous peoples. I would guess that that is already going on in fact. It may be that even that distinction is a little problematic, because I would guess that a great deal of indigenous activism is environmentalist, as well as being community defense. There probably are already some connections. I remember in the early days of Correa's government in Ecuador, that went off the rails obviously, there were very interesting alliances developing between rural communities and urban working classes and students. It really depends on, you know, how the communities organize themselves. Whether they are willing to forgo a kind of essentialist politics. Whether they're open to alliances. Whether others are open to alliances with them. You know, Brazil is such a complicated country. As I said: it has a very significant industrial base, it has major urban centers with very lively art and cultural scenes, important universities, etc. I mean, it's a country where no one sector can speak for everyone without making very serious efforts at opening up to other movements.

I can just tell you two points and they may not be applicable to your situation. I have found, in the parts of the world that I know – which is not only the United States but especially the United States –, that every single movement is internally divided between those who are or see themselves as trying to become the junior partners of the corporate class and those who really see themselves as representing the overwhelming majority of their members. In feminism, we talked about the sort of corporate, lean-in feminism versus the Feminism for the 99%, that's a little manifesto that I co-authored. That's a division within every movement. There is an environmentalism for the 1% and one for the 99%. There are anti-racist whose idea is, to quote Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "to get black faces in high places," versus those who are really trying to address the working class in the broad sense. I'm sure that these same kinds of situations play out in Brazil, in indigenous movements and every other movement. The most important thing is to figure out how to create, or to strengthen, the pro-working class or 99% wing of each of these movements. Then, to think about how to create an alliance or a hegemonic block of those forces. That means having to

break with those whom the media anoints as the leaders and who are often not working in the interest of everyone.

The other thing that I think is important is the idea of connecting the dots. You said, and it's very interesting, that indigenous people are at the forefront. They are those whose oppression is most evident and provokes the most radical resistance and response. The question is: what is the relation between that oppression and other forms of very severe oppression which people in favelas are suffering? And, even if it seems less extreme, what students are suffering, which all kinds of people are suffering? What is the relationship between these things? Are these simply separate problems or are they all traceable to one in the same social system, one in the same dynamic of cannibalizing the wealth of various forms of people in order to feed the stock market or these economic indicators?

The key to creating the kind of alliance that I have in mind would be to develop a perspective that shows people how to connect the dots. That they see that the struggle of somebody else that's thousands of miles away has to do with them. That's not easy, but it takes a lot of political activity and a talent for developing large narratives that make connections. And, you know, those who are in the forefront change. I would have said some months ago that Black Lives Matter was in the Forefront in the United States. A few months before that, I would have said #MeToo, maybe now the struggle over abortion, for example. There's a lot of conjunctural things that change. But, the thing that doesn't change is that the system is destroying the possibility of good lives for many many people in many many different situations and locations. The destruction takes different forms and it's experienced differently, and yet, it's all connected. What we want is to validate the specificity of this group's experience and not say "it's just like there". No, it's not! Validate the specificity and the legitimacy of the grievance and the struggle, but, also, make the case for the connection and that the key to an emancipatory resolution is an anti-capitalist front that can create a framework of cooperation among many different constituencies.

KC: Following this reasoning, would it be possible to frame indigenous resistance as a struggle against capitalist accumulation, through seeking to halt expropriation. Are these examples of boundary struggles?

Nancy Fraser: I think indigenous communities' survival depends on some kind of alternative to this cannibalization dynamic that is built into capitalism. Capitalism can't survive without these sorts of external bodies of wealth to cannibalize. It needs the "outside". That outside is, in that sense, part and parcel of capitalism. It's the fuel that makes it run, so to speak. The long-term survival of indigenous peoples but also the long-term survival of everyone on the planet depends upon finding some way to end or neutralize or dismantle this dynamic of cannibalization. I keep using that word because it's the title of a book that will be out in

September [2022] in English that's called "Cannibal Capitalism, and I am taking that metaphor to try to develop it.

When I talk about boundary struggles, I don't mean that as an alternative to class struggles or other types of struggles. It's a lens. And, in this case, the point would be that capitalism creates artificial boundaries between different spheres of life that rely on each other and are very closely connected. But, it conveys the impression that these things are separate and disconnected. That's the case with production and reproduction; it's the case with the Economy and the State; it's the case with city and country; with urban or rural; it's the case with exploitation and expropriation. Indigenous communities are massively subjected to expropriation. And have been for a long time. Just think of extractivism and the centrality of extractivism in colonialism and imperialism in all the forms of land grabbing. That's fundamental. But, I wouldn't look at it only through that lens. It's also about social reproduction for the community and for the planet. It's about ecological reproduction. And maybe the question of the state is the most complicated one, the political one. I don't know what political imaginaries or ideas Brazilian indigenous people hold. I followed closely, years ago, the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico, and they wanted a different political forum that recognized their political autonomy in their territory. This meant or required designing new forms of states and new forms of political relationships. And that too is a kind of what makes a major challenge to existing forms of capitalism which have always relied on this international system of sovereign states that recognize one another and that have total sovereignty over their territory, that don't have shared sovereignty, etc.

Again, I don't know enough to say much about Brazil. But, I do think that there are many questions about the deep structures of capitalism and about the nonviability of capitalism. Its destructiveness. Its need to take people's lives and lands and chew it up and spit it out and leave it devastated. There are many dimensions of that that, I imagine, are experienced as such by indigenous communities that inspire their struggles. And, as I'm saying over and over again: at some level, these have to be anti-capitalist struggles that challenge those boundaries, those separations between Town and Country; Economy and State; Nature and Society; as if that could be a sharp separation. In that sense, yes, they're boundary struggles. But, I also think they are class struggles in some important sense. In the sense that all working people, and indigenous people are working people: they don't work in factories or in offices or in private homes in suburbs. But, they are engaged in various forms of subsistence labor and nature repair work. In the work of educating and caring for their members and socializing young people. They are working people. And I think that what we really want is some broad alliance of working people. Let's put the people in the factories and in the offices and in the Indigenous communities, and so on. Let's get a new definition of what we mean by the working class! Let's get rid of the idea that it's the white man in the

factories who are the free proletarians. That's how I would look at it: that capitalism creates so much destruction and there's so much work that needs to be done to repair it and to create a new and livable form of life. Maybe this is a basis for thinking that indigenous struggles are boundary struggles but also class struggles of one segment of the working class that needs to find its way of cooperating with other segments. There are ways to reimagine what our interests are that make it possible to think that there might be ways to overcome conflicts of interest.

KC: Still on how to frame indigenous struggles: in my research, I try to relate the permanence of indigenous territories to the guarantee of social reproduction, understanding the territory as a means for the social reproduction of communities. Is it possible to frame the indigenous territory in this way?

Nancy Fraser: That is exactly how I do understand territory. I mean, very clearly, in the sense of indigenous people. It is the material basis of the community's social reproduction. It's also a place that has tremendous cultural meaning attached to it which is diffused with various traditions and cultural systems of value. You can think of it in terms of social reproduction, you can think of it in terms of cultural reproduction. In fact, those things are not really separable actually. Social reproduction always proceeds through cultural frames. So, yes, that's right. And, what we're starting to understand now is that the guaranteeing of that territorial basis of social and cultural reproduction for indigenous people is not just good for them. It's essential for keeping the lungs of the planet breathing and the temperature at a livable level. There's a sense that some of these territories are so crucial to the health of the planet that there's the means of everybody's social reproduction at the same time as we want to confer, or give a special importance to the roll of indigenous peoples that literally live on the land and care for the land, keeping it functional.

KC: Professor Fraser, thank you very much!

Nancy Fraser: Thank you too.

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