

# CHALLENGING THE IDEA OF CULTURE AND IMAGINATION AS A CRITIQUE OF VIOLENCE

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## **ABSTRACT**

Starting from the structural critique of capitalism that Fraser develops in her book on *Cannibal Capitalism*, the paper aims to highlight the need to strengthen counter-hegemonic practices in the critique of capitalism/neoliberalism not only from a systemic perspective, but from a "cultural" perspective, reformulating Gramsci's idea of hegemony. Considering the dialectic of culture, understood as both a progressive and regressive construct, the text emphasizes the need to elaborate new emancipatory social imaginaries and pragmatic keywords for collective mobilization, with the aim at fortifying transnational public discourses in the critique of violence.

## **KEYWORDS**

Capitalism. Collective mobilization. Critique of violence. Hegemony. Social imaginaries.

Nancy Fraser's book on *Cannibal Capitalism* has led me to develop further reflections upon the meaning and the impact of capitalism today as well to strengthen my current research on the critique of violence.

Fraser's holistic thesis, as argued in her book, offers us the opportunity to rethinking the interrelated pathologies of capitalism, understood in an extended and integrated way. Fraser conceives capitalism as an "institutionalized social order," encompassing all spheres of human activity, from economics to politics, from society to the environment, considered as intertwined and interdependent realms. Global challenges and polycrises we are experiencing nowadays are considered especially in light of the wake and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic that have radicalized social inequalities. Starting from this radical critique, socialism can be reconceptualized *ex-negativo* in a comprehensive way. Following Marxist theory, Fraser emphasizes the contradictions inherent to capitalism, which constantly undermines its own conditions of possibility up to the point that such ruptures and practices of resistance can lead to its questioning.

Fraser defines capitalism as a monstrous macrophage. As she argues, what we are experiencing is a cannibal capitalist orgy in which contradictions emerge alongside the perpetuation and reinforcement of the system. Political crises and emergencies do not seem to mark the end of capitalism. In the face of growing social inequities, what can we - as active citizens and professionals - do to fight against the strengthening of neoliberalism/ libertarianism, the rise of illiberal democracies, the worsening of the climate crisis, the rise of bellicism and even the affirmation of forms of neo-patriarchy? Can capitalism be understood as a continuation of previous forms, or what are the differences/ breaks with the industrial past, given the challenges at stake and the development of new communication technologies?

In her text, Fraser refers to a structural critique of capitalism and consequently asserts the need for anti-hegemonic practices. Yet how can a new approach to the idea of counter-hegemony be conceived? How can we develop an antagonistic interpretation of anti-capitalism not only from a structural and systemic perspective, but also from a "cultural" one? How can Gramsci's ideas of hegemony and culture be reformulated? What might be new emancipatory social imaginaries or keywords capable of mobilizing collective practices? Or, as Habermas notes, are the emancipatory potentials of modernity corroded and running out?

Starting from the dialectic of culture as both progressive and regressive, I would like to emphasize the need for a critical imaginary and pragmatic keywords for collective mobilization and public discourse in the critique of violence. Therefore, I would like to start with the initial and final image that Fraser poses in her book.

The text begins with the image of capitalism as an omnivorous, cruel, and cannibalistic being - which seems to reproduce by partogenesis - and ends with the call to "starve the beast". Capitalism is portrayed as a system that creates and devours what it produces. This image is very effective and fascinating. However, capitalism is not only the composting of goods, but also of people, who reactivate it and make it fit daily as a matter of symbolic and not only systemic and structural violence.

In order to better understand what a counter-hegemony could mean from the viewpoint of a renewed political culture, I would like to dwell on the dialectical representation of the cannibal, starting from its literary and historical origin.

In Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* (1610), the figure of Caliban is presented as a monster, born of a witch and a devil, who lives on an ocean island with spirits imprisoned in tree trunks, where King Prospero (ousted duke of Milan and magician, whose name comes from the Latin "prosperity") had landed following a shipwreck.

Prospero uses his magical powers on the unknown island to bind the powers of earth and sky, such as the spirit Ariel. In the imagination of an emerging modernity, Caliban represents the justification for the need to dominate hostile natural forces as well as the necessity to extend dominion over newly encountered peoples after the discovery of America. *Ex-negativo* Caliban can also evoke processes of

dehumanization in which human beings are portrayed as monsters or savages, so that they can be enslaved, tortured, or even killed.

Caliban has the same etymological root as Cannibal, which derives from the name Caribs, referring to the newly discovered land of the Caribbean. Caliban/Cannibal represents the unknown otherness, lands, peoples, and individuals to be oppressed for being "other". Western "civilization" considered natives of the continent later called America as savages, almost bestly in their attitudes. Cannibal was later translated to mean "a person who eats human flesh". It is someone/something, a monstrous human beast, which/ who voraciously consumes anything/ anybody.

Fraser understands capitalism as a totalitarian entity that engulfs both human and natural nature through an institutionalized system at all levels of human coexistence that manages to perpetuate itself over time and under different guises.

Based on these considerations, I would like to ask Fraser what role social emancipatory imaginaries - which emerge from ruptures, interstices, and practices of resistance - could play as an alternative to capitalist culture, especially since Fraser criticizes capitalism in a broader sense and mainly from a structural point of view.

With the image of capitalism as both cannibal and beast, Fraser has conversely radicalized, in an emancipatory and critical sense, political imaginaries that have connoted the history of philosophy and the philosophy of history with the representation of biblical monsters. We can think of Hobbes and the image of the Leviathan (as print in the frontispiece of his 1651 book), understood as an "artificial animal, "half human and half nonhuman", or of the Behemoth, as a terrifying creature. Hobbes's petrifying images were intended to explain the emotional fear of chaos and human survival. However, Hobbes had repressive and regressive purposes in establishing a monarchical and anti-democratic order.

Fraser subverts these powerful images by proposing a renewed and regenerated vision of socialism. Yet *ex-positivo*, how could socialism be figured out? How can resistance practices become "indigestible" and no longer "assimilable" by cannibal capitalism with the aim at becoming capable of building a socialist alternative? How to imagine it?

The question I want to ask Fraser from a cultural perspective concerns the dialectical role that social imaginaries and worldviews still play today, in both progressive and repressive ways in an imaginal society that is increasingly connoted by representations and pictures. *De facto*, symbols play a key role not only in the maintenance/reinforcement of social inequalities, but also in the struggle against them. Could we support an idea of "reliance imaginal" that refers to community's needs for ideals, symbols, and embodied practices?

This reflection leads me to ask Fraser a "genealogical" question as a counter-image/ imaginal/ imagination. Fraser starts from a conviction about the cannibalistic

attitude of capitalism. But when does this attitude emerge? Does it begin with modernity or perhaps earlier?

As critical theorists, we know very well that Horkheimer and Adorno, in their book on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, identified the instrumental attitude of human species referred to mythological violence, developing a totalistic critique of reason according to the behavior of Odysseus in a continuous process of plundering both nature and human beings.

My question is the follows: does the predatory human attitude begin with modernity, or does Fraser think - following Horkheimer, Adorno, but also recent interpretations in the debate on Anthropocene - that it has much older roots, radicalized with the strategic use of technical intelligence and new instrumental inventions that reinforce the cannibalistic inception of capitalism, began with industrialization?

Fraser claims that her "expanded conception" of capitalism draws on insights from very different paradigms, as mentioned in a dialogue with Rachel Jaeggi: from Foucault's subjectification to Bourdieu's habitus, from neo-Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* to Habermas's *Lebenswelt*, from Lise Vogel's feminist perspectives on social reproduction to Vandana Shiva's ecofeminism and Maria Mies' postcolonial ecology. Is this theoretical syncretism compatible with her critical assumptions? Therefore, I would like to ask Fraser to clarify her normative and counterfactual position by responding to Habermas's critique of Adorno, Horkheimer and Foucault's 'performative contradiction'. The question is the follows: if we conceive power and reason as a totalitarian dimension that imprison our minds and bodies, how can we escape this trap? If capitalism (of which we are a part) devours everything/everyone, how can we be immune to it when power mimetically and incessantly re-emerges under different guises over time?

At this regard, another mythological image comes to my mind. Kronos - a Titan son of Uranus (Heaven) and Gaia (Earth) - afraid of being displaced, ate his children. But the smarter one, Zeus, managed to make his father vomit, thus freeing himself and his siblings. However, Zeus will impose a new violent dominion over earthly powers and people. Metaphorically, power always reproduces itself in new forms. But the voices of the victims and the struggle of resistance for a better future always remain, as myths and artistic creations remind us across the millennia.

This question brings me to another issue concerning the self-representation of domination. Bourgeois enlightened and liberal culture and the public sphere have historically and socially, represented themselves as a struggle against an existing domination that avoided political freedom. As a result, capitalism has represented itself as a progressive factor, improving living conditions and the common good, as opposed to reactionary forces that prevented socio-economic development. From a Marxist perspective, bourgeois was conceived as a class that consolidated its

economic enrichment and political power as the dominant ruling government against other classes, race, and gender.

Nowadays tensions and connections between modern and contemporary forms of progressive capitalism and the perdurance of a reactionary and patriarchal pre-capitalist culture have become manifest. Fraser considers the links between these two elements but without focusing enough on the different forms of violence, which both exercised in present societies. Therefore, I think that our critique has to include these two aspects: the struggle against capitalist violence and the battle against patriarchal violence that permeates not only institutions, but mentalities, cultures and imaginaries. Namely, I believe that for a critical theory of society and participatory/deliberative democracy, it is crucial to first develop a critique of violence, which is what I am working on.

Therefore, in a Gramscian sense, a counter-hegemony has to reformulate non-violent cultures. If we want to fight capitalist oppression, it is necessary to understand not only its techniques and contradictions, but also the role that culture, repressive imaginaries and myths play in maintaining processes that not only permit a persistent reproduction of capitalism, but also the socio-cultural reproduction of differentiated forms of symbolic and structural, horizontal and vertical violence. In the current reproduction of both capitalism and neo-traditionalism, it is thus crucial to reflect upon the use of the Internet, social media, artificial intelligence and algorithms in the age of "surveillance capitalism" and in the establishment of new forms of cybernetic violence. The dialectic of social imaginaries is here double: on the one hand, representations enable the reproduction of capitalism, while on the other, they resurface and reinforce violent patriarchal prejudices, I would say, pre-capitalist depictions that are anti-gender, racist and homophobic.

The coronavirus emergency was a magnet that accelerated radical ongoing changes at both structural and cultural levels. Offline and online movements we saw during the pandemic were not emancipatory but based on denialism and conspirative approaches. The no-vaccine protest movement, together with a neo-libertarian, egoistic and anti-solidaristic idea of freedom, has shown anti-systemic and anti-democratic attitudes against any form of welfare state in a regressive way.

What we see today, both in public discourse and in politics, is a composite mixture of postmodernist and premodernist attitudes completely in line with dogmas of neoliberal capitalism. An example of this trend is the current right-wing Italian government, which has a worrying hybrid policy: neoliberal policies that remove social guarantees are accompanied by regressive identity policies that talk about ethnic substitution, anti-immigration, anti-Islam, homophobia, induced birth policies, pro-life views.

That is why I think that to understand the current situation and to address political issues at stake, we have to develop a critique of cannibalistic capitalism alongside traditional regressive mindsets that are reappearing and being reinforced

by social media and by patriarchal movements mobilized offline and online that reinforce myths and especially imaginaries of violence, which is basically what I am working on.

Although historical fascism will not reappear in its historical feature (it was born precisely with the revolutionary intention of fighting capitalism), we can recall what Umberto Eco named the *Ur-Fascism* or *Eternal Fascism: Fourteen Ways of Looking at a Blackshirt* (1995) with the aim of increasing awareness of the enduring potential for authoritarianism and extremism in present societies.

Against such a perspective and the possibility of new forms of totalitarianism in which neoliberal capitalism would unite with regressive forces, we need to build new participatory alliances through diffuse networks on issues of global interest, developing creative actions and anti-violence educational practices, especially since we have seen the reinforcement of stereotypes and prejudices through social media, especially after the pandemic. They dramatically influence younger generations, reproducing inequalities and violence. And this is what I'm developing as director of the departmental research center ADV - Against Domestic Violence.

Moreover, we have to rethink the meaning of legitimate power. As Arendt argued, it is necessary to distinguish normatively legitimate power from violence, to develop human capacities, to strengthen practices of resistance, to reinforce transcultural networks and to fight against all manifestations of violence, prejudices, stereotypes and hate speech, which today contribute to normalize what was called "mythical violence", perpetuated by capitalism.

The idea of socialism has always been linked - in a post-secular way - to freedom and justice that could be realized on this earth. In the crisis of mobilizing ideologies, what could be the idea of a better future, when younger generations are losing hope and trust in the fight against discrimination and the defense of the planet, when the scientists are arguing about the coming sixth extinction?

Critical theory is not only an academic practice, but also a matter of public discourse that implies a transcultural civic engagement on issues of common concern. It has to contribute to rethinking liberal socialism (as theorized by Carlo Rosselli for the movement of justice and freedom) from the perspective of anti-violence and inclusive politics. But what is the relationship between the critique of violence and nonviolence?

In the feminist critique of patriarchy, the critique of violence and any form of cannibalism means the rethinking of nonviolence in terms of a pragmatic, resilient utopianism and productive imagination against any form of domination, based on respect and dignity, reconfiguring the notion of human rights as a matter of just relations, as the tradition of feminism and socialism have shown over the centuries.

The struggle against exploitation, dispossession, domestication, commodification, the responsibility to fight violence against people and the planet is in our hands in a neo-cosmic way.

As Antonio Gramsci wrote in 1935 in *Prison Notebooks*: “Culture, it is not possessing a well-stocked warehouse of news, but it is the capacity that our mind has to understand life, the place we hold in it, our relations with other human beings. Who has culture has consciousness of himself and of the whole, who feels the relationship with all other beings.”