

“The Perfect Storm”: A Conversation with Nancy Fraser about Capitalism, Feminism and the Pandemic¹

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Abstract

In this contribution we present to the readers of “Meta” the slightly edited transcription of an online conversation with Nancy Fraser that took place in April 2021. The text includes introductory sections by Stefano Marino, questions by Anna Preti, Francesca Todeschini, Rolando Vitali and Alessandro Volpi, and replies by Nancy Fraser. The interview is based on a reading of the book *Feminism for the 99 Percent: A Manifesto* (Verso, London 2019), written by Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser, but is also focused, more in general, on questions concerning capitalism, social crises, populism, feminism, critical theory and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Nancy Fraser, critical theory, feminism, capitalism, pandemic

Stefano Marino:

Dear Nancy, first of all, thank you for your generous willingness to meet us online for this conversation and devote some time to answering the questions that a few young scholars who collaborate with my research activities (Anna Preti, Francesca Todeschini, Rolando Vitali, Alessandro Volpi) have prepared for you. Let me say that I am very happy to see you again, although unfortunately “only” on Zoom and not *in situ*, so to speak. It has been almost two years now since the book launch of *Feminism for the 99%* that we had organized in a bookstore in Bologna (see Arruzza, Bhattacharya & Fraser 2019). I hope that you can come back soon to Italy, we all have wonderful memories of that event and the time spent with you in Bologna².

Nancy Fraser:

Yes, for me too, I would love to come back, I really would. I hope it can happen. We will see.

Stefano Marino:

So, I think that we might start with Francesca's and Alessandro's questions, that are perhaps the ones that mostly resonate with the work you have been doing since the *Manifesto*.

Francesca Todeschini:

I would like to begin by asking a question related to the ninth Thesis of the *Manifesto*: "Fighting to reverse capital's destruction of the earth, feminism for the 99% is eco-socialist". In this section you affirm that the capitalist mode of production systematically provokes ecological crises that, likewise, undermine its own conditions of possibility. Those who are directly affected by these disasters are mostly women: it is estimated that 80% of climate refugees are women, who, in the global South, also represent the vast majority of the rural workforce, even if they also bear responsibility for the largest part of social reproductive labor. For these reasons, documented in your book, women have taken the reins of struggles against the growing ecological catastrophe. In their claims they don't separate ecological issues from those of social reproduction. To me this seems like a really interesting point that can be linked with what we have just lived all over the world with the Covid-19 pandemic. As the UN has explained, epidemic zoonoses crop up due to the crescent imbalance in the ecosystems and other factors related to it. Covid-19 is just another symptom of the capitalistic destruction of the earth and its manifestation has highlighted one more time our co-dependency to nature and to each other. Quarantine obliged us to a new style of life based on mutual support networks. The health crisis forced capital to focus on life and life-making work such as healthcare, social care, food production and distribution. My question to you is: what kind of practices experimented during this period do you think we should preserve in our near future, in order to fight capitalism's constitutive division between productive and

reproductive labor, and so to release women and nature from the charge of a second one?

Nancy Fraser:

This is a wonderful question. Thank you. You are absolutely right. We do try to give an analysis in the *Manifesto* that shows how capitalism's tendency to generate social reproductive crises, crises of care, is deeply entangled with several other crisis tendencies of capitalism, including the tendency of the system to generate ecological crises. And interestingly it's that exact entanglement that I have spent at least part of the last year during the pandemic trying to work on, so this was another reason I was eager to address this question in particular. First of all, I would say there is a sort of general structure, or grammar maybe, of capitalist crises, which has to do with the way the system's official economy is organized for the sake of generating profit or surplus value, the way that official economy relates to various background conditions that make it possible. And these background conditions are defined by the capitalist mindset and institutional order as non-economic, but they are absolutely essential to the official economy. So, the *Manifesto* really is especially focused on care and social reproduction as one of those background conditions, the way in which the official economy absolutely relies on this work of care-giving in order to provide the system with the human personnel, the actors, the wage laborers and others that it needs. And we argue that the way that the system sets up this relation between the production foreground – which is monetized and elaborated through the logic of exchange value and maximizing profits – and social reproduction – which is largely, although not entirely, unmonetized and unwaged – is a contradictory relation, because the system incentivizes those who are dedicated above all to profit maximizing. They are incentivized to free ride on care work, to help themselves to as much of it as possible, for the sake of keeping their costs down, and yet at the same time they are depleting it, stressing it and causing it to be the subject of tremendous stress and depletion. So, they need it, but they are also always driven to try and undermine it as

much as possible. That, in my view, and in the view of the *Manifesto*, is the sort of grammar of capitalist crises in general, because something like the exact same grammar of needing, taking and also depleting and not replenishing, that is the same story that the capitalist economy, you know, plays out in relation to non-human nature. It needs it for raw materials, it needs it for energy, it needs it as a sink to dispose of waste. You know, non-human nature, the natural processes that assure those inputs, are essential, and yet there is a drive, a relentless drive, to maximize profit making, and to do that as quickly as possible. To minimize reproduction costs of nature, to minimize repair, replacement, to free ride on all of that, that is also a formula for stressing, depleting and, in the end, just trashing nature. You can see that there is a sort of similar logic at work in these two things, but here is the kicker: these processes do not just operate in parallel side by side, they are totally entangled with each other. The tendency to produce crises of care and the tendency to produce ecological crises are not separated and side by side. I think that part of what we have to do in analyzing either of them is to really spell out, elaborate and trace these entanglements, because these entanglements are also exacerbations, they each make the other worse, so to speak. Well, actually, I could give you a case in where they are sometimes traded off, but that is maybe a technical point and let me leave that aside for now. For an example, let me give you some examples of what I think of as the entanglements. First of all, care work is itself already a part of the reproduction of human beings, not just as social and enculturated beings, but as physical, biological beings. So, it is already sitting at the interface of biology and sociality. Right, when we care, when we give birth to and gestate and care for children, we are as much concerned with their biological survival and well-being and health as we are with their socialization, education and acculturation. So, we are already at a border line between society and nature, and you can see that playing out when people and human communities are living in habitats that are also simultaneously natural and social. The way they live in material space, the way they shape the space, the meanings they give to it, the resources they draw from it: all of this, I

think, undermines any very sharp separation between social reproduction and natural reproduction. I mean, they are part of the same fabric of relationships. And I think this is why crises of care and crises of nature often go together; for example, when you have environmental stresses that immediately translates into stresses on social reproduction, and sometimes vice-versa. The examples that I want to give you have to do with a point that might have already been implicit in your question; I'd like to make it more explicit. That is, I would say that when capital expropriates chunks of nature for its own purposes and just trashes them, leaves garbage behind, it is almost always the case that they are at the same time expropriating the living space, the habitat of human's communities. There may be a few outlying cases where there is no human presence, but overwhelmingly they are taking the nature that is the means of livelihood, the place of living, the place of material basis of social reproduction of some human community. Overwhelmingly, the communities that capital targets for these expropriations are communities that are not in a position to defend themselves, that lack state protection, that lack actionable rights and disproportionately, if not universally, these are communities of color. These are communities that have been pushed onto the wrong side of the global color line. These are communities whose wealth can be expropriated and whose lives can be endangered. So, again, the ecological crises, the crises of care, are deeply entangled with questions of empire, of differential access to state protection and actionable rights, and of diminished rights and political protections available to communities of color, even within the global North. So, again, I think all of this has to do with the deeply enmeshed character of social reproduction in capitalism, with racial imperial expropriation and oppression, and with ecological crises. I come finally to the last point (I am going on for a long time, but because you brought it all together so beautifully in your question!): I think we could see the Covid-19 pandemic as the perfect storm of capitalist irrationality and capitalist injustice, as the hinge point where all of these crises' tendencies, all of these irrationalities and forms of oppression converge. So, as you already suggested in your question, it's not

hard to trace the appearance, the outbreak of the virus itself, right away to capitalist ecological predation. Because we have known for a very long time that the virus that causes Covid-19, which is SARS-CoV-2, has been harbored by bats in remote places since long ago. The question is: how did it get from the bats to us? We know that there has been a whole string of viral epidemics that are passed from bats to humans by way of an intermediate species. We got MERS by camels, but there are more examples; in each case it is a different intermediary species. We don't know for sure yet how Covid-19 got to us, but one hypothesis is that it is this strange animal that we probably never even heard of before, called pangolins. But whatever it is, what brought the pangolins into contact with the bats and what brought them then into contact with us, the answer is very clear: global warming, one; tropical deforestation, two. Yet these are processes that have been triggered through these kind of capitalist attempts to access, what Jason Moore calls "cheap nature", right? So the tropical deforestation is, you know, the Amazonian land grabs and the other rainforest land grabs aimed at getting new places for cattle ranching, and other deleterious practices that endanger biodiversity, and the carbon sequestration capabilities of the planet. Of course, we know the long story of fossil capital spewing out greenhouse gas emissions for at least 200 years. So, I believe (and I am not the only one who thinks this) that we can trace a direct link from the appearance of the virus and its infection of humans to these horrendously destructive processes of capitalist's expropriation of nature in just that dynamic of non-replenishment and non-repair. And that is point one. The second point is this would have been horrible in any case, getting this virus to infect human beings, but it was made incalculably worse by another strand of capitalist crises, and I mean the tendency (also discussed in the *Manifesto*) of this system to hollow out public powers and political capacities. The very things we needed to get a handle on the pandemic to minimize its lethal quality and extent of infection and so on, have been also trashed, especially over the last 40 years of neoliberal governance and financialization. We could single out, I think, the one sterling case in the world that might represent an exception to this is:

Cuba, the only country in the world that did not destroy its medical capacities, but actually built them up with an amazing model of medical internationalism that they developed. Instead, almost every other State has been disinvesting in public health infrastructure, and even worse, has been turning over medical health infrastructure to private profit-making firms who now control the lion's share of the world's health care related labor forces, of the intellectual property in pharmaceuticals. In the manufacturing capacities, both for medicinal treatment and obviously including vaccine production and development and PPE, we have turned that over to profit-making firms whose interest is not the interest of protecting humanity as a whole, but quite the opposite. So, we have sort of put ourselves into this position of depleting the very capacities to organize concerted action on behalf of humanity. That made things very worse. Then, there is the care depletion crises which has also fed into all of this and now leads the crunch, as you said. All of the ways in which the lockdowns and other mitigations measures have vastly increased the care load as public care institutions, schooling, childcare, elder care – all of that got dumped onto private households, especially onto women who still have the lion's share of responsibility for this. Therefore you have this kind of crazed multitasking of women, trying to organize their children's remote schooling, to care for children; some of them are now working remotely at their own jobs while they are trying to do this. We are seeing all these crazy pictures, probably in the Spanish and Italian press as well as in the American press, of women holding meetings with their co-workers in the bathrooms with the children pounding on the door "Mummy, I can't figure out how to do this algebra problem", or in their cars to find a quiet place. So, there is all that going on, as well as those being laid off, working in industries that simply shut down, and those who are working in very dangerous frontline jobs, who can't afford to be laid off or to quit, and have somehow to juggle all of this. This care problem has become massively intensified, and the capacities that people have in order to perform care work were anyway depleted by neoliberalization even before the pandemic, through the assault on unions. We saw the creation of the low

wage service sector, and what that meant was that every household – as we argue in the *Manifesto* – had to suddenly invest many more hours into paid labor to make ends meet, leaving less available for unpaid care work. Then, you throw the pandemic on top of that. It is another case in which the system took away the very capacities we might have used in order to at least handle all of this better. I could go on and on about the class and racial dimensions of this process, because it involves what is a so-called essential labor, a frontline essential work, which is the work that made it possible for us (including myself), who are more privileged, to be able to work from home, still having an income stream, and so on. You know, what made that possible for us is that there were other people out there working in the slaughterhouses, in the meat packing plants, migrant farm workers harvesting the food we eat, UPS drivers, Amazon pickers, grocery shoppers and deliverers and Instacart, or whatever the equivalent of that is there, you know, bringing the stuff we needed. If you leave aside the medical professionals, this category of essential workers is basically low-waged, non-unionized, precarious service work, disproportionately done by women and people of color, often migrants, with or without documentation. So, there is another sense in which the class dynamics of the society and the racial ethnic status dynamics play out, and so we have heard a lot, even in the mainstream press (certainly in the United States) about the disparate impact of Covid-19 on people of color and on the less privileged sectors of the working class. But I think what we haven't heard enough about is what is the social system that generates these divisions, these fault lines and these disparities, and that is capitalism. Therefore, for me, as I said before, Covid-19 is the perfect storm where all of these crises' tendencies, these irrationalities and forms of injustice, converge. This, to me, only underlines the largest point that we tried to make in the *Manifesto*, and that is that gender, asymmetric gender injustice, crises of care, none of these quintessentially feminist issues can be satisfactorily analyzed, addressed or redressed in political action, which does not have a much larger frame, a much larger lens, that takes into account their intersections and entanglements with all the other

dimensions of this huge hot mess that we are living through, which is a major general crises of capitalist society.

Stefano Marino:

Thanks a lot, Nancy, for this long and very rich and detailed answer. Actually, something that characterized all of the questions from my young collaborators that I collected for this interview is the emergence of various connections between different problems. That was something that emerged in the their questions and that was powerfully emphasized by your answer. I also think that some passages in your answer to Francesca's question somehow guide us in a natural way towards Alessandro's question, which is perhaps the most political one: it is a question on feminism that, at the same time, connects feminism to a broader political framework and thus to other problems.

Alessandro Volpi:

Yes, my main question is: how do we connect many different struggles, within one only political struggle, at the political level. And I've tried to think about populism, in the form of left-wing populism, as the right political form of that struggle. One of the most interesting aspects of your book is the connection that it establishes between feminist issues and other questions (ecological, anti-racist, LGBTQ+, anti-imperialist, etc.) based on a common anti-capitalist view. This implies two elements: (1) the capacity to connect – or, using a concept that is rich in theoretical implications, to “articulate” – different demands; (2) the need to have a strategy that goes beyond the dimension of claims for single-issue struggles and that is equipped with a transformative power at a political level. The answer that emerges from the book, and in particular from the last chapter (*The Politics of Feminism for the 99%*), seems to refer, for both aspects, to a spontaneous union and connection (from the bottom) between the different struggles that arise on a practical ground. In this context, it identifies the feminist strike as an instrument that is able to reveal the link between the claims of waged work and those of reproductive work, which therefore acquires a fully anti-capitalist dimension. However,

the “leap” between the socioeconomic dimension of the strike and the strictly political dimension of the anti-capitalist struggle does not emerge immediately, it does not seem to structure itself autonomously, and hence it may never occur. The same holds also in the case of the individual claims of environmentalist, anti-racist, LGBTQ+, anti-imperialist movements etc., whose connection in a unitary political project cannot be taken for granted. From this point of view, you have argued (declaring your affinity to Ernesto Laclau’s work) that a struggle for emancipation that includes and articulates in itself the different struggles can also take the form of a left-wing populism, at least in a transitional form towards the emergence of a democratic socialism (see Llaguno 2017). In this context, we must obviously remind the reader also of Chantal Mouffe’s work (2019). Finally, I would like to refer here to the work of the Argentinean feminist philosopher Luciana Cadhaia (2019), who, starting from Latin-American political experiences, suggests a direct connection between feminism and populism: that is, a populist feminism. As she writes: “[we must] ask ourselves if it is possible to derive antagonism from feminism, on the one hand, and if it is possible to discover a form of care within populism, on the other hand. I think that a feminism that ‘sutures’ the antagonism (and its negativity) and a populism that denies the role of the care are responsible for this missed connection (*desencuentro*) [between populism and feminism]”. Starting from these references and observations, I would like to ask you what you think about this potential connection. Do you think that a left-wing populism could be the political form for this articulation of different struggles, including the feminist one, in which a common anti-capitalist background might function as articulating factor? Do you think that something like a feminist populism is actually conceivable, or do you see a total opposition between them?

Nancy Fraser:

Well, thank you, Alessandro. It is a great question and I like the way it follows from the previous discussion, because I laid out an analysis about how you can’t adequately understand any of these struggles apart from the way the system generates

multiple fault lines and multiple contradictions that are entangled. And now we come to the question of what kind of politics and political response follows from this, so it's a very good segue. OK, first of all, let me say that I very much like the way you frame the question initially in terms of how to connect struggles, how to articulate struggles, and then specifically ask about left-wing populism. Let me start with the *Manifesto*: there I was arguing for a kind of "union" (if this is exactly the right word) for the building of a coalition, or coordination from below, of social movements that either already are self-consciously anti-capitalist or could, without too much difficulty, start to understand themselves as anti-capitalist. I would be curious as to what Tithi and Cinzia, co-authors of the *Manifesto*, would say about this, but for what concerns myself, I never understood us to be saying that we expected that to be spontaneous. I think what is spontaneous are social struggles. I think that people form movements and protest where they are in life, where they encounter deep impasses, things that they can't put up with. We could cite "Black Lives Matter" in the United States, for example. To say that is spontaneous, by the way, doesn't in any way deny all the organizing and hard work that goes into it, but nevertheless it is a new kind of movement that has emerged in a specific context. I think that the feminist strikes fall into that category as well. Again, I don't know what Cinzia and Tithi would say. Cinzia, I think, is much more in touch than I am, and even Tithi is in the Southern European context, and so on. I would put the feminist strikes and "Black Lives Matter" in the same category. These were our conjunctural responses. How long they persist with the level of energy and mobilization capacity is not clear and how they develop isn't clear either. We saw the feminist strikes developing and we decided to intervene in this conjecture. To give this movement a name, we opted for "Feminism for the 99%", trying to give an analysis of what understandings it might have already had and how it could be systematized a bit further. So, the assumption was that this worldview wasn't spontaneous, and we actually were trying to articulate it. And I suspect that activists or activists' intellectuals affiliated with "Black Lives Matter" are doing the same thing, or should be

doing the same thing, or at least something analogous. So, for me, this wasn't about spontaneity exactly. It was about the work of articulation. I think the *Manifesto* itself was a labor of articulation. It was one, though, that was addressed to people who already thought of themselves as feminists. It wasn't trying exactly to convince people to become feminists. It was saying that feminism is at a crossroad. We started writing in the fairly immediate aftermath of the Trump victory over Hilary Clinton. We thought that liberal feminism was in a hegemonic crisis as was neoliberalism in general, and that this was an important moment, and that the strikes showed an alternative center of energy to this kind of, what we call, "feminism for the 1%", or professional managerial feminism. So, yes, we wanted to articulate a feminism that, if it were to develop and become hegemonic as feminism, would be well positioned to coordinate with other social movements. And I always thought that we also needed for parallel processes to develop in other social movements, that we needed an "anti-racism for the 99%", an "environmentalism for the 99%", and so on and so forth. These would be the sort of partners that a "feminism for the 99%" would have an easy time – so, a couple of points – articulating with. We deliberately decided to use a "populist" language even in the title of the *Manifesto*. "99% versus 1%" is a sort of classical populist trope. It sort of developed in our times through "Occupy" in the United States, and also by Bernie Sanders, who would talk the billionaire class versus the 99%. This is not a sociologically sophisticated class analysis, it is a "populist" one. Even though we use this language rhetorically as a mobilizing device in the *Manifesto*, there is plenty of class analysis in the *Manifesto* that is much more sophisticated than simply "99% and 1%". We are sort of playing a double game, you could say rhetorically, we are borrowing the mobilizing power of some "populist" tropes but we are trying to infuse into that, we are trying to educate people in a way that helps them understand what a capitalist class is, what a working class is, how the working class is not just the factory proletariat, the fact that it is not just those who earn wages, etc. So, we are doing something that I think goes well beyond populism in any strict sense, and from my point of

view that is a good thing. Now, I do want to come to my dear departed friend Ernesto and my dear friend Chantal. I want to say that I love their analysis of hegemony and the whole process of hegemonic articulation, but hegemony is not society, and that, for me, is a mistake that they made in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, thinking that an account of hegemonic articulation could replace the need for a critical societal structural analysis (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). Such analysis would include class analysis and so on, and should not be done in a reductive way. I mean, the whole problem of the relation between these levels, structural analysis and hegemonical analysis, remains an issue. But I believe in that two-level analysis and so, in that sense, I am not a Laclauian or a Mouffeian; I am more like a Gramscian, but one who has what I call an expanded view of what capitalist structure is, that takes into consideration the ecological dimension and the social reproductive work, and even sees the political dimension a little differently than Gramsci. In this regard, I wouldn't myself try to connect feminism and populism by looking for antagonism within feminism and care within populism. That sounds like an interesting idea, but it sounds a little forced to me. That is not how I would go about it. I would say that populist movements have arisen, they are going to continue to arise, because there remains a very legitimate disgust and anger with the obscene levels of inequality. I mean, just today the "New York Times" has a front page story about the mega, mega, mega profits of the big 5 tech firms (I am talking about Amazon, Apple, Google, Facebook and Microsoft). Even within the capitalist class there are these huge winners, as well as some relative losers. Anyway, we are going to have populist movements for sure. The question is, for me, which of these movements are potentially emancipatory and can potentially develop into democratic eco-feminist social movements. And I hate liberal anti-populism, the way that liberals want to invalidate all populisms, tar them all with the same brush, an irrational mob, demagoguery, etc. There are real differences between left-wing and right-wing populisms, and these have to do with whether their idea is a sort of a dualistic structure of "the 1% versus the 99%" defined inclusively, or whether it is a tripartite structure with the

virtuous people caught in the middle between the 1% and the despised underclass. And the other main difference is whether the enemy – even the 1%, let's say – is defined in concrete particulars to cultural terms or in functional terms. And I am not saying that one can't slide into the other; it can. It's not like there is a hard and fast line, but it really matters whether you define the enemy functionally, in terms of a role it plays, like the capitalist class or the financial segment of the capitalist class, versus an ethnic group or a national group, a racial grouping. That makes a big difference and is another important difference between left-wing and right-wing populisms. So, I become infuriated with these liberal posturing people who think they have the monopoly on rationality and the others are just deluded, irrational and dangerous. But what matters, I think, is precisely how you coordinate forces that are differently situated but can potentially come to see themselves as sharing the common enemy of capitalism, and more specifically the capitalist class, not "the 1%". "The 1%" is a good starting point for thinking about this, but you want people to be able to learn something about how their society works and how to get a more precise understanding of what is going on, because that is an understanding of what must be changed and how it might be changed. So, I am tempted to say that left populism – and this means using an old Trotsky formulation – might be a transitional socialist formation, but my true belief (and, again, this goes beyond anything we have said in the *Manifesto*) is that, in the end, populist sociology is too crude to give people the tools that they need in the course of a struggle to ultimately develop a real counter-hegemonic project that has a chance of winning and of bringing about the forms of deep social transformation that are needed. So, I do want to give the *Manifesto* a little bit of credit for trying to bring in a kind of neo-feminist Marxian analysis within the sort of attention grabbed by the mobilizing title *Feminism for the 99%*.

Stefano Marino:

Thanks, Nancy, for this rich and detailed reply. While you were talking, some of the things that you said quite naturally reminded me of certain aspects that were present in

other questions written by my young collaborators, such as the question concerning the role of spontaneity, or the one concerning the work of articulation, etc. This especially reminded me of some elements that are present in Anna's question, so at this point I would like to invite Anna to jump in (so to speak) and read her question, so that she can take part in our fruitful dialogue with you.

Anna Preti:

OK, thank you so much, Stefano, and thank you Professor Fraser for your observations. *Feminism for the 99%*, a work that truly gives expression to the politics of the strike of our time, was published during a year that has incarnated many of the book's theses. 2019, in fact, has witnessed another vast wave of international strikes – this time driven by what was about to become the new global movement for climate justice. The events of the last years have been very significant: climate justice – thanks to the explosion of the new Environmental Global Strike movement and its annexed manifestations – started to become a reliable paradigm for gathering movements fighting against a general crisis of life on the ground of social reproduction. Climate Justice – in Italy, but not only – has nonetheless experienced a path of development. If, in a first phase, a more “individualistic” approach focused on lifestyles prevailed, a significant shift occurred at the time of the third strike for climate (September 27, 2019) where, taking the example of Italy, a fruitful ground for confrontation with basic unions was opened up; consequently, during the second national assembly (October 5), a very advanced report on political ecology was produced. In just 5 months the new paradigm of climate justice evolved from having blurred ideas on identity politics and personal responsibilities in a semi-structured feminist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist global critique against the neoliberal assault on the reproduction of life. The Coronavirus pandemic further strengthened the latest political frame of climate justice, underling the importance of the links between the struggles against environmental devastation and those against social inequalities, and reinvigorating our awareness

about the variety of everyday struggles – or the capacity to “stay with the trouble”, quoting Donna Haraway. While “capitalism is raising the stakes of every social struggle”, many movements that follow the anti-capitalist path are also raising the stakes of their demands, uniting under the comprehensive concepts of “climate justice” and “social justice”, seemingly preparing the ground for “a new, unprecedented phase of class struggle”. The hybridizations and collaborations between these groups are increasing due to their common terrain of action: the safeguard of the reproduction of life against its neoliberal assault (health care, housing, pensions etc.). But beside this spectacular capacity of cooperation, what also seems peculiar of our historical moment is the awareness concerning differences and peculiarities of each other’s identities and struggles. If contemporary feminist practice has played a key role in democratizing strikes, “expanding their scope” by “broadening the very idea of labour” and by opening up the horizon on what social reproduction really means for the survival of the planet, it has also brought a new attention to identity politics. With the formulation of the concept of “intersectionality” 1970s’ black feminism had greatly considered the differences occurring in individual experiences, based on different sets of intersecting systems of oppression. Today’s movements for social and climate justice, i.e. the movements “for the 99%”, seem to be pretty aware of these processes. The fact that “there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (Lorde 2007, 138) seems to characterize the widespread sensibility of today’s movements in comparison to the ones from the 1970s. *Feminism for the 99%* ends up with a remark according to which the new class movement for social and climate justice we are trying to build should be based on a universalism mindful of each other’s differences. However, as we can learn from the history of feminism, if it is true that identity politics can often lead to the trap of individualistic divisions (or, even worse, to co-option by liberal rhetoric), the latter is also something necessary and precious for the freedom of everyone. And if the concept of “class”, in needs of revisions to match today’s working class, can sometimes conceal singularities, it is the final glue that can bring together all

these movements. Do you think that the history of feminist thought, and the experience of the Women's International Strike movement, can teach to the other movements "for the 99%" (like the new global environmental movement) which path to follow in order to keep the two visions of identity politics and class politics together? How do you envision this match in your feminism "for the 99%", a movement that shouldn't fall into extreme fragmentation, separation or co-option, while at the same time should be able to build – in the words of Rosa Luxemburg – a "class feeling"?

Nancy Fraser:

That is a great question, Anna. I am very struck by your observation that we do have this sort of eruption of mobilization of movements, even in the pandemic. For sure, all the ones that you mentioned are very aware of intersectionality. I think that is an absolutely right observation and a very fruitful one, because it is something new. It is something distinctive about this conjuncture. I think I want to just throw in, before following your line further, the somewhat less happy observation that, in this spirit of intense mobilization, we also have huge and powerful right-wing movements. Intersectionality is not their strong suit, we should say. So, we are talking about one side of the spectrum here. You know, I might have a slightly less rosy or optimistic view of this than you do, and that might be because I am situated in the United States and I am finding that what you beautifully called this attentiveness to difference and identity in politics, I am finding that it sometimes takes forms that worry me. Namely, a kind of intense focus on micro-aggression and an intense focus on calling out people who use a bad phrasing of something or shaming, canceling, etc. Now, I don't want to be misunderstood in what I have just said. This is also used as a viscous anti-left wing trope by the right wing; Fox News, for example, is always going on about cancel culture. What I am saying is not that, but what I am saying is that I think these movements are still struggling with how to embody the interest in intersectionality and the attentiveness to identity and difference in ways that are politically generative and in the work of promoting

connection, coordination and coalition. So, that is one thing. I am also really happy that, on the other side, you see a real desire to challenge questions of class. Again, in the United States I see a lot of desire for that, which manifests itself in sort of rhetorical strategies that always throw the word “class” in, when you talk about race, gender, disability, sexuality, and so on and so forth. I see less actual real class focus and analysis of a serious kind. Now, we have just had this heartbreaking defeat of the Alabama Amazon workers, and this is really something. You know, the whole left universe in the United States was thinking that all Amazon’s workers were going to unionize themselves. So, there is a whole other story, and it’s not just that Amazon played hardball in its anti-union organizing, it also has to do with the fact that they pay 15 dollars an hour and give full benefits to workers in Alabama, and so it is one of the best jobs you could possibly get in Alabama. So, you know there are the contradictions of what it really means to seriously think about class questions. I don’t know about feminism teaching other movements. Certainly, the concept of intersectionality came out of black feminism which was already intersectional, and I think it is fair to say that feminists ran with this idea earlier than other movements, so maybe that paved the way for its widespread acceptance. Again, I wish that all three of us [*scil.* Arruzza, Bhattacharya, Fraser] as authors of the *Manifesto* were all here doing this interview together, because it is also possible that we disagree to some degree. I would formulate the standpoint of the *Manifesto* slightly differently: that is, I do not see the problem as trying to bring together class politics with identity politics, or whatever that means. I see the problem as sort of deeply transforming what we mean by class politics in such a way that the issues that get raised in politics of identity or difference are now sort of reinterpreted and rethought in the frame of a class politics. Let me say one last point on this, as I think it also relates to what I was trying to say in the previous exchange that we just had with Alessandro. This is just a thought, and it is not in the *Manifesto* and is strictly mine, and I have no idea what Tithi and Cinzia would think about it, but it has to do with what it means to bring together, if left populism might not be the ideal way of

doing it. This is the thought I had about, and it really does put the class question at the center. It is a thought that I had last year, when I was teaching W.B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction*, and I don't know how widely it is read in Italy or Spain, but it is a kind of towering masterpiece of Marxists historiography, on a par, I would say, with Trotsky's history of the Russian Revolution. Du Bois starts that book by talking about the fact that the United States, in the time of the struggle to abolish slavery in the Civil War and in the reconstruction period after the Civil War, actually was a country in which there were two labor movements developing. There was the official labor movement of the new trade unions in formation, and the new attempts to build labor parties and socialism coming to the United States after 1848. That was the labor movement of the free white exploited wage workers. But abolition was also a labor movement. It was a struggle to deal with the other face of labor within capitalism (expropriated, unfree, dependent labor, racialized labor, and slave labor). And the tragedy of the outcome of this huge convulsive period in American history was that these two labor movements were unable to recognize one another as the two wings of the two faces of labor in capitalism that needed to unite in a common struggle against the system that generated two kinds of labor and relied necessarily on two kinds of labor. As I read this with my feminist hat on, I said, "Yes, yes, but there is also a third labor movement", and that is the care work. There is a sense in which feminism is also a labor movement. In none of these cases are we talking about reducing literally every question in some reductionist way to just labor, but all the forms of violence and subordination, as we tried to show in the *Manifesto*, can in some way relate back to the way that the system provides productive and reproductive labor in a gendered way. And I am not sure if there might even be a fourth or fifth labor movement, other struggles that we could interpret in this way, but, in any case, it just struck me how rather different struggles share a common matrix and how there might be idioms for translating them. It is the idea of thinking about a system that splits different forms of labor off from one another, divides them, relies on all of them, cannibalizes each of them, but, in different ways, feeds

off of them. I am in the process of trying to write something about this now, this is another possible language, conception or framework for thinking about the problem that all of you have been raising, which I think is, in a way, the problem of the *Manifesto* about how to understand conceptually connections and how to promote forms of political engagement that are mindful of connections and that are committed to building them.

Stefano Marino:

Thank you very much for these inspiring observations. I will now give the floor to Rolando.

Rolando Vitali:

I will change almost completely my question, which was somehow very technical³. First of all, just to see if I understood correctly or if this could be another point of view, it seems to me that we should use the concept of labor not as a reductionist instrument, so to speak, in order to reduce all struggles to one, but as the mediation which connects movements with structural reproduction of society in such ways that the movements become structural, insofar as they tackle and, so to speak, attack labor relationships. To be precise, this is not due to a primacy of labor itself, but to the fact that labor is the way in which we get together and reproduce our society. So, this was just the preamble. I see one big problem which underlies all our struggling in order to create political identities, and to me the problem is to recall Marx's words "The weight of the dead on the living", so to speak. Social reproduction is a problem for the capitalist system but, at the same time, the capitalist system is also the way in which life is reproduced. The problem seems to me that people are somehow conscious that something is rigged and doesn't really work, but at the same time they have to respond to the system. So, my question is: how could we escape this cage, this entanglement between capitalist accumulation and social reproduction?

Nancy Fraser:

Right, great. That's a great question, Rolando, great question. Let me say what I don't think is a good answer. It is harder to say what a good answer is, than to say what is not a good answer. One would sort of totalize the system dimension, so that you would end up with something like some of the Frankfurt School thinkers had, like the totally administered society, as if there was no room to have anything that wasn't completely sort of functionalized for the system. That is a bad answer. Equally bad answer is the idea that there are these virgin spaces that you can retreat to. I mean what Samir Amin would have called "delinking": a space where you could go and build a solidarity economy that is somehow not caught up in the tentacles of the world system. That is impossible. That is why I don't like some of the feminist works that have many powerful, interesting ideas, but that end up wanting to validate subsistence living, as if this was some pure outside to the system. So, somehow, we need to find the sweet spot between these two extremes, and again I am telling you what I think, and this is not in the *Manifesto* but it is in some of my other works on capitalism. My idea is that capitalism has all these institutional splittings and divisions: it divides production from reproduction, it divides society from nature, it divides economics from politics, it divides exploitation from expropriation. So, it sets up to us, or presents to us, the separate zones or spheres, and in each of them it gives us, or encourages us to adopt, certain normative perspectives. So, when we are functioning in the official economy, we are supposed to act based on the interest and equal exchange and arm's length transactions, don't get too involved, have competitive relations. When we are in the sphere of care, we are supposed to be altruistic, and we are supposed to be involved in mutual reciprocity, and so on and so forth. In the political sphere, we are supposed to think to some degree about a common interest and think of ourselves as equal participants, and so on. Yet, the thing is, we have a lot of normative resources in the society. None of them is the way they are set up when they are used in the right sphere, they are functional for the system, more or less; but we are complicated beings that

live in many different spheres, and we don't segment our lives as perfectly as we are supposed to, and then, when we get into intense impasse situations or crisis situations, all the rules go out the window, we start using the wrong norms and the wrong spheres, so we have a lot of possibility for critique, because we don't need pure outside ideas. This is again part of the Gramscian picture. The contradictions are there, including normative contradictions that we can put to critical work. I think that this may not be a full answer to your question, but the system has its own internal complexity and contradictions: they have what Axel Honneth would call "a normative surplus built into them", they can be used otherwise. So, that's the best I can do on that. I think that is what we actually do, because *contra* to Horkheimer's or Marcuse's "one dimensional man" idea, we criticize all the time. Under normal circumstances the criticism is just grumbling here and there, but in times of crisis, where we get this kind of counter anti-systemic movements, we are mobilizing some of these resources for a criticism that can be genuinely transgressive and counter-hegemonic.

Rolando Vitali:

Thank you very much. Let me just say that I have studied Adorno for a long time and I do agree with some of your outlined problems.

Nancy Fraser:

Yes, I don't mean to trash all of Adorno (laughs).

Stefano Marino:

Well, actually, I am an Adorno scholar and I have two new books on Adorno⁴ that are currently in print... so, I would also suggest not to trash all of Adorno... (laughs).

Nancy Fraser:

Careful what I say, oh... (laughs).

Stefano Marino:

No, of course I was just joking (laughs)... Anyway, I would like to talk for another hour with you, Nancy, about

critical theory and feminism⁵, but I know that it is late and it is not possible to do it now. So, this means that the next time you come to Bologna we will organize a conference or an event on critical theory, and we may have time to talk about this! Thank you, Nancy: it was a pleasure and honor for us, and we really look forwards to meeting you again in Italy.

NOTES

¹ The present text is a slightly edited version of an online Zoom conversation with Nancy Fraser occurred on April 30, 2021. The participants at that online conversation included the authors of the present contribution: Stefano Marino, Anna Preti, Francesca Todeschini, Rolando Vitali and Alessandro Volpi. The transcription of the oral conversation with Nancy Fraser was made by the language school and translation agency Inlingua Imola, with the financial support of Stefano Marino's research funds at the University of Bologna, Department for Life Quality Studies. As the readers will easily see, our conversation with Nancy Fraser was characterized, among other things, by a friendly atmosphere and great spontaneity, generosity, enthusiasm and kindness. In making the editing of the text, with the aim to publish it on a philosophical journal, we decided to opt for a light intervention of editing rather than a more substantial one, thus limiting ourselves to small corrections, in order to try to preserve the abovementioned spontaneous, enthusiastic and sometimes even funny atmosphere that had characterized our Zoom conversation. As the title of the present contributions clearly shows, one of the topics at the center of our interview with Nancy Fraser is the Covid-19 pandemic and some of its sociopolitical consequences and problems. As we said, the online conversation took place in April 2021, namely in a period in which, in Italy and in many other countries, most people were still living in particularly difficult conditions, like lockdown, "state of emergency", etc. We hope that our readers, beside the strictly and rigorously philosophical contents of this work, may also appreciate what we called the friendly spirit that, even in such a difficult period, animated our online dialogue with Nancy Fraser and that we would like to consider as an evidence for the strength of the *philia* that all philosophy is made of, which is always able to persevere against the general tendencies of the historical moment.

² We refer here to a book launch of *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* that we organized in May 2019 with two colleagues of the University of Bologna, Prof. Annarita Angelini and Prof. Paola Rudan. We would like to use this occasion to also thank Olimpia Malatesta for her precious help in the organization of that event in 2019 and also for her support in the preparation of the present interview with Nancy Fraser, although it was unfortunately not possible for Olimpia to effectively participate to the Zoom conversation that day.

³ We refer here to the fact that, originally, Rolando Vitali had prepared a slightly different question for Nancy Fraser, but the spontaneous

development of the conversation on Zoom led him to ask the question that has been included in the present text and that readers can thus read here.

⁴ We make reference here to the authored book *Verità e non verità del popolare. Saggio su Adorno, dimensione estetica e critica della società* and the co-edited book *The “Aging” of Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory: Fifty Years Later* that Stefano Marino was working at in April 2021, when the present Zoom conversation with Nancy Fraser took place.

⁵ It is important to note that, meanwhile, some relevant contributions on the relation between critical theory and feminism have appeared. Limiting ourselves to just one example, we would like to remind the readers of the recent edited book by Stögner & Colligs (2022).

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