



Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System Is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet – and What We Can Do about It

Nancy Fraser

London and New York, NY: Verso, 2022

ISBN: 9-781839-761232

XVII + 190 pp.

Nancy Fraser has established herself as one of the principal leaders of feminist and intersectional thought, solidly based in Marxist theory, with a string of books and other publications that have appeared since the late 1980s. Here, in *Cannibal Capitalism*, she has created an overarching model of contemporary capitalism and pictured it, effectively, as a monster that is in the process of devouring democracy and, indeed, everything on earth. This means expanding the common conception of capitalism as residing within the economic dimension to one which incorporates “... *all* the oppressions, contradictions, and conflicts of the present conjuncture (p.xv).” This is achieved through understanding the role of gender and racial structuring, as well as the ecological dimension, as having been subordinated into the pre-eminent capitalist system, particularly that form which has been brought into being by neoliberalism (which she terms the age of ‘corporate bingeing (p.xvi)’).

Fraser describes the development of capitalism in these terms:

“... capitalism’s history can ... be viewed as a sequence of socioecological regimes of accumulation, punctuated by regime-specific developmental crises, each of which is resolved provisionally by the successor regime, which in due course generates a developmental crisis of its own (p.93).”

An example of how this has taken place is provided by the move from somatic to exosomatic economic regimes. Somatic systems depend on energy expended within the body (i.e. reliance on human and animal labour) and exosomatic on energy within machines, outside the body. With the invention of the coal-fired steam engine, British textile manufacturers moved their activities from places where hydropower could be found to urban areas, which were more convenient for the gathering of a labour force that could work and

live in close proximity. The externalities of this production included the pollution of air and water systems in cities, which occurred simultaneously with the denuding of the countryside (p.97). This was the movement from Nature I (self-replenishing and mostly devoid of nature) to Nature II, which is a “construct of capitalism” and “Operationalized in the dynamic of capital accumulation (p.90).” More recently, we have entered into the age of Nature III, when the resources of the world are removed from the commons and placed under private ownership for the purpose of additional accumulation: from old-growth forests to monocultural plantations to bringing previously little-used land into intensive agriculture using genetically modified seeds and the risk of zoonotic disease.

A similar process brought about the racial and gender inequalities also very evident now. Once the possession of natural resources (i.e. Nature II) became the principal factor in determining continuing profit margins, then the rational response of the capitalist was to seize land overseas and then find ways to justify the expulsion of any people who might have been living there. This reprises Lenin’s (1917) explanation and so is on good theoretical grounds. Thus were born ideologies such as nationalism, racism, xenophobia and so forth, which had not been necessary before. Gender relations are also brought into the genesis of capitalism not because of religious or philosophical reasons, although these subjects may be relied on to provide useful crutches for any discrimination. Instead, it is purely to do with the money: if it is widely held that women are inferior to men, then it is only reasonable that they should be paid less and that the extra-curricular work that they do (e.g. emotional, domestic and reproductive labour) be consigned to a subsidiary dimension of human activity because it does not directly relate to production and capital accumulation. Fraser is one of the scholars who have written about this elsewhere and here she incorporates into her argument the provision of care as an interpersonal relationship without which contemporary society would not be possible. She defines this set of activities as “social reproduction” and defines it as the “... energies needed to tend to families, maintain households, sustain communities, nourish friendships, build political networks, and forge solidarities (p.53).” In another review in this volume, I mention Alexandra Kollontai’s belief that no single relationship can provide all the emotional needs necessary for the creation of a new and healthy society (Ghodsee, 2022:55). It is not surprising, therefore, that the corporate media and entertainment industry is so fixated on the monogamous romantic relationship and the fetishization of the nuclear family. Fraser’s contention is that no society that cannibalizes its social reproductive work can survive for long. It is certainly true in the case of Britain, where the withdrawal of the state in the form of systematic austerity has led to what appears to be an imminent collapse of society and the birth of such monsters as Brexit.

Cannibalization is the culmination of Fraser’s arguments and is the idea that capitalism, which is already self-evidently devouring the planet and all that live upon it, is also devouring all of our social and political institutions, including democracy. Neoliberalism has put markets at the centre of every transition and the ability to pay has supplanted any other consideration in terms of the distribution of resources (there are some exceptions to this in the form of government services but these are also in the process of being outsourced to private interests). This, as we see is a season of increasingly obvious climate emergency crises, is clearly unsustainable. Which brings us to the ‘what should be done’ chapter that it is customary to find at the end of analytical books such as this one. In many cases, this concluding chapter can appear to be tacked on at the end just because it is customary to do so and the recommendations may only tangentially relate to the rest of the work. In this case, the organic development of the argument is matched by the rationality of the solutions, which largely relate to undoing what has been done. That is, not thinking to restrict our activities ‘merely’ to the economic dimension but to all those other areas which capitalism has incorporated into itself. Central to this will be what legal scholars call “redomaining,” which is “... redrawing the boundaries that demarcate societal arenas and deciding what to include within them (p.153).”

This should be approached in a fully democratic manner. It is difficult to imagine how that might be phrased for a t-shirt.

Overall, this is a significant contribution to understanding the current situation, even if the trick, of course, is to change it. Fraser writes clearly and cogently and carefully tied together the different parts of her argument. The attempt to link oppression, discrimination and the logic of capitalist accumulation is, I think, a success and one well worth considering.

References

Ghodsee, K. (2022). *Red Valkyries: Feminist lessons from five revolutionary women*. London and New York, NY: Verso.

Lenin, V.I. (2010). *Imperialism: The highest stage of capitalism*. London: Penguin [1917].

John Walsh, Krirk University