

Not Making A Virtue Of A Necessity: Nancy Fraser On 'PostSocialist' Politics

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Nancy Fraser is one of the most influential voices of contemporary Anglo-American feminist theory. In particular, she has worked in the encounters between socialism and postmodernism and between feminism and postmodernism. Her work has been key in the development of feminist theoretical perspectives that are not immobilized by critiques of 'big sister' feminism or 'big brother' socialism. Rather, she has articulated a feminist position that remains productive for political critique, retains some kind of feminist or critical project and finds a way beyond the impasse. In her book, Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory (Polity, 1989), Fraser described herself as a democratic socialist and feminist. However, she is highly critical of old-style socialist politics, especially for their lack of feminist and ecological analyses.

Fraser works on theory for the sake of politics. She writes for an academic audience, addressing problems generated within political practice, particularly some of the personal and political dilemmas that emerge. She maintains a 'bifocal' approach to developments in theoretical work and to current political conditions. Fraser's academic background was in philosophy and she is currently Professor of Political Science at the New School for Social Research, New York. In her work she reflects upon the tensions and contradictions of trying to do critique within the academy. Being a radical academic is not, she argues, a contradiction in terms.

The interview was conducted in London in June 1996 by Pam Alldred and Karen Triggsⁱ. Fraser has since published her second book Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition (Routledge, 1997).

STILL A SOCIALIST AFTER ALL THESE YEARS? DESCRIBING A CONTEMPORARY 'POSTSOCIALIST CONDITION'

PA/KT: In Unruly Practices you describe yourself as a socialist-feminist. Would you still use that term to describe yourself or, perhaps, in the late 1990s, would you want to qualify it in any way?

NF: I would use it, but I would want to be extremely frank about the fact that I don't any longer know what I mean by socialism. Nor, I think, does anyone else. For me, the word is a marker for the need for some vision of an egalitarian and liberatory political economy, even when we don't know its precise content. I don't believe it's possible to have a liberatory cultural politics without a political-economic under-girding. Thus, I tend to think of the present moment as - with apologies to Jean-Francois Lyotard - a 'postsocialist' condition. By this I mean two things. On the one hand, there's a lot of ideological garbage about the triumph of neoliberal capitalism and so on, which we must criticise and demystify. On the other hand, the collapse of communism in 1989 was not simply the delegitimation of the Soviet Union and formerly existing institutional socialisms; rather, there's been a larger crisis of confidence and crisis of vision on the left. I am willing to claim the term socialism, if I can qualify it. For me, the word must be dissociated from any pretense of certainty and nostalgia. It can only be the sign of something that has yet to be invented.

PA/KT: Even if we don't want to lose the critiques provided by socialism, are there some positive aspects within the loss of vision that you mention?

NF: It's good to lose a vision that was flawed and I think that the major understandings of socialism were quite flawed on many levels; they were androcentric, de facto based on masculinist and majority nationality-based cultural assumptions. Insofar as traditional models presumed the notion of a command economy or the nationalization of large-scale

industry, they are increasingly out of touch with the political economy of post-fordism, which is highly flexible, differentiated and transnational. In addition, the traditional socialist vision was production-centred and largely blind to ecological considerations. Thus, the loss of that vision opens the way for better alternatives.

PA/KT: Your essays in Unruly Practices are interventions within feminist and political debates of the late 1980s. What do you think are the most important challenges for feminists in the late 1990s?

NF: A major challenge has to do with the emergence of a very strong anti-feminist backlash. Even as many important feminist ideas have been widely disseminated and absorbed into the culture, there is a very articulate, mobilised backlash. At the same time, the movement has become differentiated and specialised. Academic feminists, for example, are increasingly engaged in very sophisticated debates amongst themselves that are sometimes out of touch with the larger changes in the Zeitgeist. We sometimes talk as if we need only bring our thoughts and our demands to 'the great unwashed masses', whereas in fact there is an enormous right-wing anti-feminist mobilisation which we haven't yet figured out how to address. Today there's more of a problem in terms of how academic US feminism relates to currents outside of the academy than there was when I was writing Unruly Practices. Increasingly so, because although the book was published in 1989, many of the essays were written much earlier. At that time I didn't have such a strong sense of disconnection between academic feminism, and feminism and anti-feminism outside the academy.

This separation has to do with the more general challenge posed by the larger shift in the political winds - which I called our 'postsocialist' condition. I put that term 'postsocialism' in quotes in order to signal the need to interrogate it and maintain a critical relation to it. What I mean by it is that the horizon in which we're all operating is one in which we no longer have any credible vision of an alternative to the present order, which socialism provided, for better or worse, for a hundred and fifty years. In the US, we've got

a very strong, resurgent free market neoliberalism, as well as a very strong cultural authoritarianism. To the degree that feminism of the second wave grew out of the movements in the 1960s, this was a time of ascendant radicalism and progressive emancipatory movements. For me, and many people of my generation, which is the 1968 generation, it went without saying that one could go forwards in a kind of ascending line and whatever gains one had one could build upon. What we're now confronting, and it's a terrible traumatic existential shock, is the idea that you can actually regress, lose things that you thought you'd won. Maybe only a very naive American optimism prevented us from realising that before! But my generation of feminists assumed relative economic prosperity. We also assumed that the civil rights and legal gains we won one day could not be lost on the next. Today, therefore, we feel that the rug is being pulled out from underneath us.

THE POLITICS OF REDISTRIBUTION AND THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION

PA/KT: Your recent work articulates a conceptual division between two political forms or strategies: a politics of redistribution, and a politics of recognition. A paradigmatic example of the former would be socialism because it addresses the economic exploitation of workers and a paradigmatic case of recognition politics would be lesbian and gay struggles or multiculturalism. You go on to describe how a redistributive approach is likely to reduce the distinctiveness of dominant and subordinate groups vis-à-vis each other, whereas recognition politics may be about increasing the recognition of specificity and hence emphasizing differences between groups. Gender struggles, however, traverse both forms of politics. Gender inequalities require both a politics of redistribution, to remedy women's economic subordination, and a politics of recognition, to challenge cultural devaluation. You refuse a socialist position that subsumes cultural subordination within economic subordination, but insist on retaining a materialist analysis. You reject the idea that one can assume that justice of either type will necessarily follow on from the other: both types of struggle are necessary and neither is sufficient.

NF: You have given a very accurate picture of the main lines of argument in my recent book Justice Interruptus.ⁱⁱ Since it was published, I've done more work on this project and it's developing in a slightly different way from the original formulation, which I was not entirely satisfied with. Nevertheless, the impetus for this project remains relevant. It was conceived as an intervention in contemporary new social movement politics in the US, although I think the idea probably applies elsewhere as well. What concerns me is the relative eclipse within these social movements of social politics, especially egalitarian redistributive politics, and the relative ascendancy of cultural politics, especially identity politics and the politics of difference. I worry that we're losing the balance here and that, frankly, it fits much too conveniently with the 'postsocialist' condition. How convenient for the right if we fail to insist on material equality just at the moment when neoliberalism is ascendant! My intervention is aimed, therefore, at advancing the slogan: no recognition without redistribution. At an earlier moment of Marxist hegemony on the left I may have said the opposite: no redistribution without recognition, but now I think the slogan that's needed is no recognition without redistribution.

However, I'm now trying to get away from what I feel was the overly additive character of my original formulation of these ideas. In the book I have said that we should be for socialism in the economy and deconstruction in the culture, as if these were two spheres or levels of society. The real point should be to think integratively about the relation between cultural struggles, and social and economic struggles. The example I give, and it's one that I've been working on for many years, is welfare. At one level, everyone understands that rethinking the welfare state is a redistributive project, but what is less clear is that it also requires reinterpreting the dominant norms and cultural meanings of gender; sexuality, what counts as work, what counts as a contribution to society, what is the basis for entitlement, etc. These cultural norms and social meanings are so completely interfused with distributive questions that we can't really separate them. As a result, struggles to transform the welfare state for the sake of egalitarian redistribution cannot succeed unless they are joined with struggles of cultural change.

And vice-versa. Thus, welfare can be seen as an example of how the cultural and the social interpenetrate one another.

PA/KT: A particular example for the UK would be that, until recently, if you were a woman who was receiving unemployment benefit and were in a partnership and cohabiting with a man, your unemployment cheque would be addressed to him. The welfare state was here constructing the meanings of gender and of heterosexual relationships. Is that what you're describing?

NF: Absolutely. In the US, it's constructing being a single mother, especially a poor single mother, as sexually deviant, irresponsible, being a 'scrounger', having babies to avoid employment, etc. As if raising children were not work and a contribution! Meanings and norms permeate all the institutions of society; be it the welfare system, the legal system or whatever. So, when it comes to evaluating proposed institutional reforms, we must take two different standpoints; the standpoint of recognition and the standpoint of distribution. From the standpoint of redistribution, we must ask: who benefits and who loses materially? From the standpoint of recognition, in contrast, we must ask: how does this policy construct different subject positions? What status differentials or hierarchies does it constitute? Who is constructed as normative and worthy of respect and who is stigmatised as undeserving? In other words, we should consider how policies affect the relations of recognition as well as the distribution of resources. Policies that are economically redistributive can have the unintended effect of harming people's status. When properly analyzed, many issues have these two dimensions, which I insist are irreducible to one another. Redistribution and recognition are equally primary and yet completely imbricated with one another. They cannot be addressed separately.

PA/KT: Do you feel a post-structuralist approach to discourse would stop you from disentangling these issues, that is, disentangling meanings from the material?

NF: Not at all. Some post-structuralist approaches to discourse provide very useful tools for analyzing the relations of recognition. The mistake is in thinking that this is a substitute for analyzing the relations of distribution. In contrast to those who treat post-structuralism as a total Weltanschauung, I defend what I call a “perspectival dualism”. That means I insist on the need for two different standpoints of critique. One is the standpoint of cultural analysis, which concerns the status order and the construction of subject positions, including whether some people are relegated to second class citizenship in society. Here is an area where all the sophisticated new developments in cultural studies, including post-structuralism, can be extremely useful in unpacking how status differentials and hierarchies of value are established and played out in social institutions. You don't have to confine that sort of analysis to things that we think of as paradigmatically cultural; as I just indicated, the welfare system is just as cultural as a movie is. But there's also a second, absolutely crucial, standpoint of evaluation and critique that one has to adopt as well, namely, the standpoint of distribution, which concerns material resources. The cultural dimension and the distributive dimension are fused together and yet they don't map one on one. You can't assume that once you've got the cultural analysis you can read off the economic or vice versa. There's a certain autonomy even as they're interfused. That's my current view on these things.

THE USES OF FEMINIST THEORY or DO WE MIND THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE?_

PA/KT: The social protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s inspired and propelled theoretical analysis of various kinds whereas, as you've noted, a gap seems to have grown between social movements and critical theory in the following decades. Feminist activists have been suspicious of feminism's 'turn to theory'. While women are active in a range of new political movements, and are visible as organizers as well as activists, specific campaigns addressing the inequalities that still exist for women do not seem apparent. What light can feminist theory shed on this? Does the recognition that there is

not a simple unity among women rightly complicate campaigns about women's issues or undermine them? Does this relate to the fact that young women in Britain tend not to identify as feministⁱⁱⁱ, even though their expectations can, in many respects, be seen as feminist?

NF: With respect to the 'turn to theory', I would want to distinguish between different currents. Feminist theory has made possible an enormous array of techniques for cultural criticism. I think we really need to analyze film, video, advertising and so on. Approaches have become very sophisticated and this is extremely useful, assuming it can be rendered accessible, which I think it can. What I worry about is that this has taken over as almost the only game. I see much less that's creative and sophisticated in social and economic theory and in political theory, in the more traditional sense. Thus there is a disconnection between feminist cultural theory, which is very rich and ascendant, and social/economic policy analysis, which doesn't seem to be very lively at this point.

At another level, the culturalist ascendancy is manifest in a theoretical impasse. We are spinning our wheels over identity politics. There's a constant to-ing and fro-ing between essentialism, anti-essentialism and strategic essentialism, without ever getting to anything else. Many feminist theorists want to get out of the terrain of identity politics. But they don't succeed. They just go back and forth between essentialism and anti-essentialism.

Put another way, the time is past when feminism, or any movement, can focus on elaborating a specific identity in isolation from other movements and currents. Feminists have undergone a healthy self-criticism about that. Yet the way the self-criticism is being formulated is not actually getting us to anything else. One tendency is just to complicate identities by looking not only at gender but at other strands of the construction of identity, including 'race', class, sexuality and so on. Taken in one direction, this leads to ever smaller and more specific identities, whereas my sense of what we really need is to get beyond this identity terrain altogether. My suggestion for how to do that is to reconnect

our current preoccupation with 'the politics of recognition' to a renewed focus on 'the politics of redistribution'.

PA/KT: What kinds of politics of recognition do you support then?

NF: 'The politics of recognition' covers a range of possible approaches to group identity. If the aim is to redress status harms and value hierarchies one could assume a deconstructive approach aimed at destabilising current identity categories. But there are also other ways of transforming the status order, including the kind of liberal universalism which tries to affirm universal humanity, and the kinds of politics of difference which try to revalue the undervalued identity. These represent three different politics of recognition, and although I'm very partial to deconstructive strategies, it's probably more useful to think about them, not as simple alternatives to each other - although they are in tension with one another - but rather as levels. What one wants is recognition of universal humanity at one level and then recognition of difference at another level and then deconstruction at another. So, somehow we must combine all three - with one another and with redistribution!

PA/KT: Are you disappointed that specific local struggles don't have a vision, and appear to have abandoned larger stories?

NF: I wouldn't use the term 'disappointed'. But I do feel strongly that it's important not to make a virtue of a necessity. This is a feature of the time we live in, that none of us can simply will ourselves out of. Part of what I mean by the 'postsocialist condition' is precisely the lack at present of a comprehensive vision of an alternative to the present order. Thus, in one sense we don't have any choice but to do specific campaigns even though we don't really know how they might connect to one another and to a broader project of social transformation. But what I find really pernicious are theories that attempt to say that any attempt to envision a broader picture is Stalinist, totalitarianism and so on

- fill in your own term of abuse. The absence of a broader vision is not a permanent condition. Francis Fukuyama^{iv} is wrong. This is not the end of history. Alternatives to the present order will emerge at some point in the future.

PA/KT: Is there an element of historical determinism there? That 'this is the time when this is happening and that there will be a time when it isn't so'?

NF: There's no determinism in reflecting on the horizon in which we are operating, which is, of course, an historical horizon. The motive for doing so is, as I suggested earlier, the sense of having the rug pulled from under you. It's a very different moment from the one that gave birth to feminism twenty years ago, and I feel the need to step back and think about it. I use the word 'horizon' in a sense that does not, involve determinism. What I called the 'postsocialist condition' is the horizon in which we are, for the time being, necessarily operating, but I believe that it's possible both to be within this horizon and to interrogate its limits critically from inside.

From this perspective, it's worth thinking about how the word 'coalition' is functioning now in US discourse about new social movements. It works as the sign of an aspiration to connect various local initiatives and struggles to one another. The term 'articulation' in Mouffe and Laclau^v is another marker of this desire. This is a completely proper, appropriate aspiration because we all know that significant change does require massive co-ordination. The problem is that these words 'coalition' and 'articulation' will remain empty unless we begin to talk about what the basis for a coalition might be. That is, unless we begin to think programmatically. In the US, for example, we must try to develop a non zero-sum way of thinking about affirmative action.

PA/KT: We've rejected the unitary subject of feminism and this leads to not presuming commonality, but merely acting with certain women on certain issues. What's exciting about coalitions is precisely the fact that there isn't a pre-given basis. What you just

referred to as the emptiness of coalitions is what seems to allow novel alliances to be made.

NF: It depends on what one means by a pre-given basis. To begin to try to articulate the basis for coalition is not, in my view, to constrain activity and political processes. Political processes are highly evolving, contingent and not really constrainable. But all the more reason, therefore, to be pushing oneself at every point to articulate what it is one's trying to do and where it is one's trying to go.

My instinct is to try to think big. I would say that one always does implicitly, have some bigger picture in mind. It's just that, usually, it's the status quo. People take for granted the existing background institutions. For instance, it's usually assumed that there have to be jobs, and that jobs are how people get their income. Thus, it's not that there's no big picture, it's just that the picture in place has the status of common sense. It's critically useful, in contrast, to try to imagine how local struggles might look different, might take a different form, if we re-imagined the implicit picture. That's what I mean about non zero-sum game. It's the case now that in current taken-for-granted, large-scale, institutional arrangements, people who we think all have just claims and who we think should all be on the same side, have interests which are constructed as opposing one another. Thus, the gains of some seem to come at the expense of others. What one has to do, if one is serious about coalition, is to imagine different sets of background conditions and background institutions in relation to which people might begin to reinterpret their interests, so that they no longer appear to be opposed to the interest of their potential allies. This is difficult but I think it's what Trotskyists used to mean when they spoke of transitional socialist programmes. I am trying to conceive local struggles in ways that are transitional and lead to something else, rather than being, ostensibly, only local struggles.

CONTEMPORARY US/UK FEMINISMS AND THEIR INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS

PA/KT: We began by talking about the US feminist movement facing a backlash. Can we speak of US feminism as a movement, as a single unified project?

NF: Yes and No. It was easier to speak of a movement when feminism was a very visible, dramatic counter-cultural formation that could be found in the streets and that had certain unique social practices like consciousness raising. What we have now is quite different. Much of what began as counter-cultural has become institutionalised. I'm not sure exactly when one stops speaking of a movement and when one starts speaking of something else, but today we find feminist consciousness and initiatives in every social institution throughout the social order. There are, in addition, a small number of overarching leitmotif concerns, like abortion rights, where you can still put together a large demonstration. But maybe the term 'movement' is less appropriate now for this kind of a political formation. Especially since, in the US, political parties are not primarily ideological to the degree that they are in Europe, and feminist energies are dispersed. We don't see much of anything we could call a feminist agenda at the level of political parties.

PA/KT: Do you think the existence of official initiatives dents the 'radicalness' of this thing that we're not going to refer to as a social movement?

NF: It depends. There are cases where official state institutionalisation does not dent 'radicalness', as it is an expression of a successful conquering from the grass-roots. But there are also cases where institutionalisation involves co-option. Generally, institutionalisation is double-edged. The fact that right-wing politicians sometimes think they can get votes by drawing from a certain kind of feminist discourse shows something about the inroads that feminist ideas have made. Yet any time a movement's claims get valourised enough to become incorporated into the state apparatus, they necessarily get changed into something else. The incorporation of feminist claims into government social programmes definitely has an effect on the 'grammar' of those claims. The movement

loses some control over its own project. A good example of this is legalisation. What it takes to translate the demand into a legal claim that can stand up in court can change your sense of what the injustice is and what the remedies are going to be. Yet it's undeniably a sign of progress that certain kinds of feminist demand do obtain legal status.

Feminism, in its counter-cultural and radical phase, was very much about self-transformation through consciousness raising and so on. Thus, it has been susceptible to various depoliticising currents, which are very strong in the US with its cultural stress on voluntarism and individualism. We have the same problem in the Black movement. That movement is today in a terrible crisis, much worse than that of feminism. There is an understandable sense of giving up - on membership, integration and transformation of American society - which goes along with the emergence of voluntarist politics of self-help. Many Blacks feel they have to do everything on their own, they can't expect anything from the Government, from whites and so on. And some conclude that 'we'll take care of our own lives', perhaps becoming Moslems, or by marching with a Million Men on Washington, saying 'we'll atone, we'll get ourselves spiritually in order', while not making any demands on the Government. This is all very American.

PA/KT: Does such individualism explain younger women's lack of interest in feminism?

NF: I really don't know exactly how to account for this, except to mention again the success of the right, and the media also, in portraying feminism as something passé. Although this is very strong it's also complex, because the same young women who distance themselves from feminism and don't want to use that word about themselves, clearly hold aspirations and expectations that I would say are feminist. They expect to combine career and family, for example. Incidentally, some polls have shown that Black women are considerably more likely to say they are feminists than white women in the US. That's very interesting and requires reflection and explanation.

PA/KT: If we can't speak of a movement any more, do we then talk of movements? Even then, are we simplifying to pre-given groups gathering around identities? For instance, the way gender and 'race' intersect is more complicated than simply to speak once again of a Black women's movement.

NF: What is usually perceived as a gender issue, say, in respect of reproduction, has racialising subtexts and the critical task is to explicate these, to think critically about them. Any issue is going to involve intersecting strands. Usually, understandably, one strand tends to be salient and central but that does not mean one can ignore the others.

PA/KT: It's movements plural rather than, say, a movement which has fractured?

NF: Not exactly. When one gets involved in a struggle, say, around reproductive rights, it is usual that the actors engaged in such struggles position themselves as women and in that sense gender is initially the salient focus. But it very quickly becomes clear that there are dimensions which may be in the background but which are there and are important; that have to do with sexuality, 'race', or class, and so on. Feminists certainly have become sensitive to the inadequacy of focusing too single-mindedly on gender at the expense of other strands. Now, you might say, well, how can one translate that multi-strand awareness into a set of demands, a form of campaign or a set of struggles? I think that this can and does go on. I don't think complications are a bar to activism. We don't have to simplify the heterogeneity in order to have a strong activist ability.

PA/KT: Perhaps this is something of a caution to academic theorists, not to imagine we need to iron it all out in the academy before they can do anything at the weekend.

NF: Yes, absolutely. I agree there!

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- ⁱ Karen Triggs and Pam Alldred planned and conducted the interview jointly. Pam wishes to thank Tim Jordan for his extensive editorial help with the original edited transcript.
- ⁱⁱ And an earlier piece: Fraser, N. (1995) 'From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a "Postsocialist Age"' New Left Review, 212 (July/August): 68-93.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Wilkinson, H. (1994) No Turning Back: generations and the genderquake, London: DEMOS.
- ^{iv} Fukuyama, F. (1989) 'The End of History?' The National Interest, Summer, 3-18.
- ^v For example, Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C. (1985) Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: towards a radical democratic politics, London: Verso.