



Cannibal capitalism: how our system is devouring democracy, care, and the planet—and what we can do about it

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Brian Milstein¹

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Those familiar with Nancy Fraser's work know her fondness for Marx's 1843 definition of critical theory as 'the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age' (Marx, 1975 [1843], p. 209). Aimed at activists and scholars alike, *Cannibal Capitalism* shows how an array of pressing social problems—struggles over racism and (neo)colonialism, time-poverty and crises of care, the looming climate crisis, and the hollowing out of democratic institutions—all trace back to a more general crisis of capitalism. At one level, Fraser's message is that various left movements have more basis for common cause than they sometimes think. Long insistent that social justice demands attention to both redistribution *and* recognition, she shows why any notion that progressive politics must choose between class *or* identity rests on a false dichotomy. There is no anti-capitalist class struggle without co-equal struggles for racial, gender, ecological, and democratic justice, and no struggle for racial, gender, ecological, and democratic justice can afford to ignore the root culpability of capitalism. But Fraser also has a theoretical message: if we want to understand capitalism, we need to understand that it is not simply an economic system, but an 'institutionalized social order' that encompasses—and cannibalizes—multiple spheres of social life.

The first chapter lays out Fraser's overall approach. Using the classical Marxian conception of the capitalist economy as a foil, Fraser argues that the economy and the various features we associate with it, including markets, capital accumulation, worker exploitation, and class conflict, are but the 'front-story' of capitalism. Behind it are several 'back-stories,' which involve spheres of activity that we do not typically describe as economic, but are just as essential to capitalism as wage labor. In fact, a key aspect of what makes capitalism capitalism is the way it establishes institutionalized 'divisions' between the economic front-story and these various *non-economic*

✉ Brian Milstein
brian.milstein@ul.ie

¹ University of Limerick, Castletroy, Co., Limerick V94 T9PX, Ireland



back-stories, while concealing the ways the former is dependent on the latter. Thus, capitalism creates divisions between the spheres of human society and non-human nature, paid-labor ('economic production') and typically unpaid carework ('social reproduction'), private ownership and contract ('economy') and public power ('polity'), and free citizen labor ('exploitation') and dependent racialized labor ('expropriation'). In each of these binaries, the former sphere distinguishes itself from the latter even as it draws resources from the latter, all the while disavowing any responsibility for the resources it draws. In disavowing responsibility, capitalism invites the destabilization of these latter spheres and, in doing so, jeopardizes essential facets of society and life on which it itself is dependent. Capitalism is cannibalistic, not just in the way it devours other areas of social life, but in ultimately devouring itself. Hence an image Fraser often raises, and that graces the cover of the book, is the ouroboros: a snake eating its own tail.

Each of the subsequent chapters delves into one of these front-story/back-story divisions and how it has evolved over capitalism's history. For each, Fraser mounts an argument for how a major line of social conflict is best thought of by means of a critique of capitalism and its divisions—for example, why the politics of racialization and the global color line should be examined via a division between free exploited and unfree expropriated labor (the subject of Chapter 2), why capitalism possesses a uniquely parasitic relation to non-human nature and fosters a particular social construction of it (Chapter 4), and how capitalism systemically undermines democracy and democratization (Chapter 5). Her point is not to reduce these conflicts to questions of capitalist economics, in the way some orthodox Marxists in the past sought to reduce all other social struggles to matters of class conflict; rather, she seeks to promote an expanded conception of capitalism that encompasses not just the economy, but an array of social domains, each of which is the site of social struggles concurrent with and co-equal to the class struggle that has been the traditional focus of anti-capitalist critique.

Fraser uses the term 'boundary struggles' to describe these expanded realms of conflict that occur around these front-story/back-story divisions, and a further feature of her approach is to show that these divisions have never been static. In her telling, the history of capitalism consists of four distinguishable phases, each of which involves a particular way of setting up these divisions. For example, the history of the division between economic production and social reproduction (Chapter 3) is that of a gendered division of labor. Thus, during capitalism's early mercantilist era, household and economic activities in Europe remain largely traditional and intertwined, but over the 19th century there becomes established a new order of 'separate spheres,' whereby the sphere of (largely male, waged) economic labor becomes sharply distinguished functionally and spatially from that of (largely female, unwaged) care labor.

In the postwar era, this 'separate spheres' arrangement was modified into that of the 'family wage,' wherein welfare protections secure an ideal of cisheteronormative (and white) nuclear families sustained by a single male breadwinner. Following the turn to neoliberalism in the 1970s, this ideal gradually gives way to the 'dual earner' household, in which women and men are both expected to work full-time while either outsourcing carework to another party or taking upon themselves the burden of an unpaid 'second shift' (Hochschild & Machung, 2012 [1989]). Each



arrangement represents an attempt to acclimate the needs of social reproduction to the needs of capitalism, but each ends up proving itself unsustainable because capitalism, in the long run, is inherently parasitic on social reproduction.

Fraser tells parallel stories for the other three divisions (exploitation/expropriation, society/nature, and economy/polity) across the four historical phases of mercantile capitalism, nineteenth-century liberal-colonial capitalism, postwar state-managed capitalism, and neoliberal financialized capitalism. Every historical iteration is punctuated by outbreaks of crisis and conflict, as all turn out to be ridden with tension and contradiction. One could easily envision a table of all these historical iterations, with one axis representing Fraser's four divisions and a second axis the historical phases. One can even add a third axis distinguishing 'core' and 'periphery,' as Fraser continuously stresses how the iterations of each division play out differently for (neo)colonial regions and among racialized minorities than for ethnic majority members of North Atlantic powers.

The final chapter poses the question of socialism as a response to the problems of capitalism. Just as capitalism must be understood, not solely as an economy but as an institutionalized order that interacts with multiple non-economic realms of life, so too must any future attempt at socialism incorporate the needs of these various realms. But she does not go into much detail here. Rather, she acknowledges the tall order and raises several challenges, including the costs of past damage and injustice and learning from the errors of previous failed attempts.

At a compact 165 pages, *Cannibal Capitalism* pulls together and synthesizes a breath-taking amount of material. But any work of such scope and ambition is bound to raise questions. For example, while Fraser's various divisions and backstories are narratively compelling and analytically effective, their ontological status isn't fully clear. At first glance, they appear determined by some sort of functionalist logic; however, Fraser insists they are maintained institutionally, as the outcomes of boundary struggles (pp. 21–22; see also Fraser & Jaeggi, 2023 [2018], pp. 54–55). Even so, it is hard to get away from the impression that her divisions are defined more via a retrospective understanding of capitalism's systemic needs and their normative stakes than via the perspectives of historical struggles' actual participants. This can risk grouping under one 'boundary struggle' movements that were quite disparate or even at odds.

To be fair, Fraser is aware of this somewhat messier side of things and has thematized it in other work on the 'triple movement' (Fraser, 2013) as well as her ongoing research on the 'faces of labor' (Fraser, 2022). And to what extent this kind of methodological question poses a problem may depend on how far an investigator wants to go in applying her framework to the hermeneutic understanding of how these various historical struggles played out. My sense is that such grand-theoretic lens-building is less her main interest than a new way of making sense of present-day conflicts. And this it does powerfully. *Cannibal Capitalism* possesses building blocks of an original social theory, but first and foremost it gives us a novel way to rethink our assumptions about capitalism, while calling on us to direct that rethinking to overcoming the challenges and dilemmas of the age.



Data availability Not applicable.

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