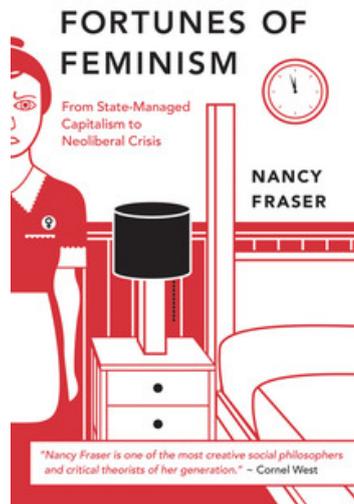


# Review: Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*

Sinéad Kennedy



Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* Verso 2013 £14.99

During the last two decades of feminist theory, what was once central to feminism - a fundamental critique of the nature of capitalist society - found itself increasingly relegated to the margins. Hegemonic or mainstream feminist theory no longer understood itself in terms of challenging the global capitalist system, and instead, increasingly found itself, at best in accommodation with the forces of neoliberalism and at worse in convergence with corporate and neoliberal interests. Questions of race and class, once essential, were marginalised or altogether abandoned in favour of identity politics, while the welfare state endured a vicious and sustained political and ideological assault. However, the current capitalist crisis has dramatically altered the global political and social landscapes and feminist politics has not found itself immune to these debates. In contemporary social theory, an interest in Marxism has meant an increasing emphasis on both understanding the roots of the capitalist crisis and the exploration of radical alternatives.

These tensions between mainstream femi-

nism and the demands of the neoliberal market are at the center of Nancy Fraser's new book, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*, a collection of her essays from 1985 to the present. Collectively the essays map and critically assess the capitalist state's shift from a 'state-managed' variety to the neoliberal nightmare of today through the prism of the struggle for women's liberation. Fraser argues that a "dangerous liaison" between feminism and neoliberalism has emerged, a trajectory that is necessary to acknowledge and dissect if the movement is ever to regain its emancipatory promise. Fraser, a professor of political and social science at the prestigious New School for Social Research in New York, would certainly be at the top of a depressingly short list of female public intellectuals. She is both a prominent second-wave feminist and a prominent member of the Frankfurt School's third generation. Her work has made an important contribution to social theory through her efforts to integrate a feminist analysis into the critical theory framework of the Frankfurt School. The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory emerged around the figure of Max Horkheimer who took over the Institute of Social Research in 1930 and brought together a group of prominent thinkers that included Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse. They took as their starting point Marx's 1843 definition of Critical Theory as "the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age". and steeped themselves in writings of Karl Marx and Georg Lukacs. The Frankfurt School saw their "age" as one of revolutionary defeat; the Russian and German revolutions were unsuccessful and not only had the working class failed to execute their "historical task" of ushering in socialism, fascism was emerging as the dominant political force in 1930s Europe. Unlike Marx and Lukacs, whose theoretical starting point

was the revolutionary potential of the working class, the Frankfurt School abandoned any faith in the working class as the agent of emancipation. Their principal theoretical concern was whether a critical theory of society was even possible without the working class. And if it was, from what position or to whom were they speaking? Fraser's answer to this question is to argue that critical theory should adopt the significant oppositional social movements of its age.

*Fortunes of Feminism* is Fraser's attempt to do precisely this and she produces a refreshingly honest account of the successes and failures of feminism from a left perspective. For too long Fraser argues the left has been preoccupied with questions of culture and identity and failed to address issues of redistribution and political economy. As a result of feminism's neglect of the fundamental question of social and economic justice in the second half of the twentieth century it became vulnerable to the assaults of neoliberalism. She conceives of the trajectory of second-wave feminism as a play in three acts. Second wave feminism emerged from New Left of the 1960s and was deeply influenced by socialist ideas of political and personal transformation. By the 1980s what Fraser terms the "politics of recognition" had come to dominate with feminists advocating for the acceptance of cultural difference over material equality. Whereas the earlier generation of feminists that sought to "re-make political economy" the later ones concentrated on transforming culture. Instead of locating issues like work, care, sexual violence or gender disparities in political representation in the context of the capitalist system, these issues were reconfigured as issues of cultural values. Social struggles were subordinated in favour of cultural struggles, producing a dangerous and unintended consequence: an unholy alliance with neoliberalism. One of the reasons for this, Fraser contends, is that cultural politics easily "dovetailed with neoliberalism's interest in diverting political-economic struggles into culturalist channels" and "repressing all memory of social egalitarianism". For example, she argues that cri-

tiques that were once the centerpieces of feminism like the "family wage" or state paternalism are used today by neoliberalism to idealise the "two-earner family" and to legitimate attacks on the welfare state. The irony was that the very cultural changes promoted by the second wave in the end "served to legitimate a structural transformation of capitalist society that runs directly counter to feminist visions of a just society."

When it comes to Fraser's discussion of the present day or act three, she remains hopeful. She makes a powerful appeal for a "reinvigorated feminist radicalism" capable of speaking to the global economic crisis arguing that if this "reinvigorated feminism" were to join with other emancipatory forces it could subject runaway markets to democratic control. Fraser proposes, a new alliance of "emancipation with social protection", where freedom and solidarity could stand shoulder to shoulder. The questions that Fraser addresses have become frequent themes within Marxist debates on the crisis: Do we require a systemic alternative to capitalism or a reformed, humanized and better regulated version? What role does feminist theory play within this debate? Will the emancipatory struggles of the 21st century serve to advance the disembedding and deregulation of markets? Or will they serve to extend and democratise social protections and to make them more just?

These are important questions but Fraser make it explicitly clear from the introduction that her aim is provoke questions for contemporary feminism and not to provide a roadmap for its future. Instead she proposes to offer a compass, pointing feminism toward a reckoning with political economy after identity politics. This is all very well and refreshing, but up to a point. The capitalist crisis has produced some important diagnosis of our current predicament but few alternatives, although this is clearly what people are looking for and more importantly need. Fraser begins her book by defending the necessity of theorists returning to "grand theory," but she offers very limited theoretical models. She

is clearly a critic of capitalism and has produced a powerful and important critique of feminism's alliance with the neoliberal capital. But arguably the "wishes of the age" demand something more. The one alternative model that she does advocate is, what she terms, the "universal caregiver model". It is a model that proposes that work would be organised in order to accommodate caregiving. Both men and women would have a shorter work week and a series of support services such as child care would ensure that childcare and domestic work did not dominate women's lives. By undoing the opposition between paid work and care work much of the structural basis for inequality between men and women would be undermined as both sexes would perform both types of work. This would create the net effect of reducing the time spent on these activities as well as creating more free time for both men and women. She writes: "citizens' lives integrate wage-earning, caregiving, community activism, political participation, and involvement in the associational life of civil society - while also leaving time for some fun."

This is a very attractive model and in a

world that continually insists on the necessity of pragmatic realism her utopian aspirations are attractive and refreshing. However, if Fraser's suggestion is to be anything more than a utopian longing we do need a model or a roadmap. One of the most powerful conclusions that we draw from her work is that it was second wave feminism's failure or reluctance to confront capitalism as the economic and ideological basis of women's oppression that made it vulnerable to a neoliberal assault. Any attempt to impose Fraser's model would result in a direct collision course with capitalism and the neoliberal state. The only force capable of wielding the necessary power to win that confrontation is the working class which as a result of women's entry into the workforce is bigger than ever. This is the agent that is absent in Fraser's account but without them her vision can only ever be utopian.

As a result the future (or fortunes) of feminism remains uncertain, although Fraser is hopeful that a feminism that embraces its original 'insurrectionary spirit' could still emerge...