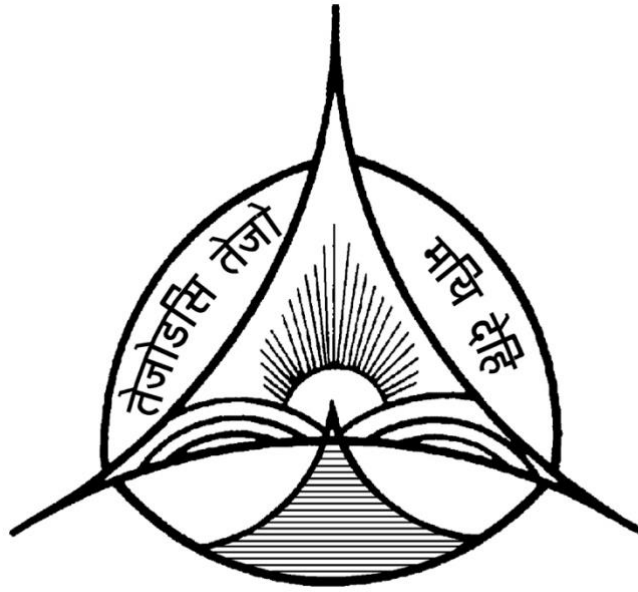


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## FEMINISM AND THE NEED FOR A STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATIVE POLITICS: A CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR NANCY FRASER<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

Nancy Fraser is an American critical theorist and feminist, and the Henry A. and Louise Loeb Professor of Political and Social Science and professor of philosophy at The New School in New York City. An Einstein fellow at the John F. Kennedy Institute of the Free University of Berlin, she also holds the chair in global justice at the Collège d'Etudes Mondiales, Paris.

**Taisha Abraham (TA):** Let me begin by saying that I am a great admirer of your works. This is to do with the consistent ideological position that you have taken regarding feminism and the capitalist state and your engagement with left politics. The second wave of feminism you state started out as a critique of capitalist exploitation by the androcentric state, but it ended up contributing key ideas to its latest neoliberal phase. The goal of the second wave of feminism was two-pronged. On the one hand, it believed in participatory democracy and solidarity, and on the other, it advocated a new form of liberalism leading to individual autonomy. Somehow, under neoliberalism, you argue that we have slowly surrendered the first to the second. My question to you is this: Would you place the onus on us women to have foreseen this economic future of capitalism given our own marginalised position under patriarchy? Even Marx could not predict it.

**Nancy Fraser:** I don't think the issue is so much blame and what could have happened and who did what. I think the issue is trying to understand where we are now and how to chart a different path. There are liberal corporate feminists, maybe not large numbers, who knew exactly what they were doing and who wanted feminism to be about meritocratic advancement and getting rid of discrimination so that talented women could become CEOs of Facebook. They are need based. I don't blame them at all. Then there are people in a country like the United States who don't have much experience with structural analysis, socialist or Marxist left wing thinking, and who, without knowing, are influenced by the rampant individualism and volunteerism of American culture. This is a default position. If we don't push against it for a structural transformative politics you will get sucked into liberalism in America. It is so powerful. Then, you have within feminism a much smaller group of real leftists—in which I include myself—who fought against it, who tried to warn against it. It is a mixed picture. The point is, because the number of card-carrying liberal, corporate feminists is small, the mass of feminists and of women more generally are in theory attainable, are open to a left perspective if we develop it in a way that gets enough attention in the public

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<sup>1</sup> This interview was conducted in JNU on 20 March 2018.

sphere. I think the heart of the issue now is to understand how liberal, corporate feminism triumphed within the movement. How the socialists and left wings of feminism were marginalised. How the great mass literally shifted towards the liberal position, not just because of feminism, but because everything in America drifted that way: environmentalism, anti-racism. The left perspective did not survive except marginally through the 80s and 90s as compared to the 60s and 70s when it was powerful. In my view, we can win these people to a different feminism. I am now involved in a campaign to develop what we call feminism of the 99%. Part of the story though is not just what the new project is, but to understand how the mainstream of feminism got tied up in this dangerous liaison with neoliberalism.

**TA:** One of the issues that you discussed in your interview in *Left Voice* was that unless interventions are made by the left, ‘Progressive Neoliberalism’, by which you mean ‘an alliance of mainstream currents of new social movements (feminism, anti-racism, multiculturalism, and LGBTQ rights), on the one side, and high-end “symbolic” and service-based business sectors (Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood), on the other’, will reformulate itself. You talk about recruiting into the ‘anti-neoliberal project of a rejuvenated left among others, the rust belt, the mass of Trump voters’, who you state are neither racists nor committed to right wing policies. In other words, you place the onus on a rejuvenated left to set things right. I have in mind the organisational capacity of the left, particularly in a country like the United States to do this.

**NF:** Not yet. No. There are many problems in America. We did have a historically powerful communist party and socialist party. The communists were absolutely the main organised force in support of the industrial labour movement and the new deal. Then came McCarthyism which totally repressed and wiped out the organised left. Because of McCarthyism, people of my generation—I am a 68 generation—grew up knowing nothing about the history of American radicalism because there had been an imposed amnesia. So, I am part of the new left generation who really tried to reinvent the wheel of radicalism, socialism and of course feminism, slowly learning that we were not the first.

Now let’s get to today. The old left does not exist. The new left has dissipated into various forms of liberal meritocratic identity politics. But there is something happening, although it does not have an organisational form yet; I am thinking about Occupy Wall Street which created the language that we are using—of the 99% and the 1%. It’s a populist language. It is not really planned in the social sense. But it is a very useful transitional language. Occupy emerged spectacularly and received a huge amount of positive support—some polls showed that 70 per cent Americans supported it—which was remarkable. However, it quickly collapsed and disappeared apparently without a trace, with no organisation and no programmatic project. This really illustrates the problem of organisation. First of all, there is an anarchist sensibility. A lot of my students are anarchists. They think they don’t need organisation. I think they are completely wrong. This is a new fashion—they think it is more radical than organisation.

**TA:** Wasn’t this true in the 1960s as well with the anti-Vietnam war movement and other counter cultural movements?

**NF:** The 60s were mixed. There was actually a growth of left parties, small left parties like Trotskyites and Maoists, but it didn’t last. You have to distinguish the capitalist culture from the new left. I would say that the broader capitalist culture was a political, rock-n-roll, pop,

lifestyle. Then you have the new left, including the anti-war movement. There was some organisation. People who took positions for social responsibilities that included all the different professional groups that were anti-war, union caucuses, etc. Then you have the hard-core left which was joining and creating parties that were closer to the old left parties. That is all gone and now.

Today, we have social movements that come up, become spectacular and disappear, seeming to leave nothing until Burney Sanders. That is the reappearance of Occupy in a new guise with a much broader social base attracting rust belt factory workers. Do you know that 8.5 million people who voted Obama in 2012 voted Trump in 2016? This is the rust belt. It is the voters in these states that made the crucial difference— Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin; these were the decisive states. And those were Obama voters in 2012 and Obama campaigned from the left using the rhetoric of Occupy. This shows me that not all Trump voters are hard-core racists; they are protest voters who want working-class friendly politics. They are not necessarily wedded to right wing ethno-nationalism. They are available.

Sanders, who was not perfect, showed that we could use the word socialism in the American context, which was extraordinary— whoever thought that was possible? And it showed that you could build an alliance of these industrialised struggling working-class unities with urban youth. He had a hard time in the beginning attracting African Americans because the Clintons had such a tight relationship. But by the end, he was winning large majorities of urban working-class youth, perhaps not the rural class. He was putting together a new kind of coalition, and then there was a split within feminism. Sanders split feminism. There you saw the legal corporate feminism; Hilary or nobody. They have the full critique of what they called the Burney rows, as if Burney was a mad thing, totally lost; and then you had the younger left-wing feminists and others who knew that something was wrong with the Democratic party, feminism and Obama. This is a very hopeful sign.

The problem in the US is that our electoral system is such that it is virtually impossible for a third party to actually win elections. We don't have PR; it's winner take all, and whenever the Greens have tried, there have been huge problems. They ended up inadvertently giving the elections to George Bush, the Florida belt, etc.

Rarely in US history do you have a real third party. There have been some parties, but when we form parties, it is not with the expectation of winning an election or with an agitational educational campaign. There is an ongoing struggle in the democratic party between the Clinton wing and the Sanders wing. It's quite a tight struggle. We don't know how this will play out—probably as a fuzzy, not very good compromise, I would bet.

But we do need to face the organisational question. Someone asked me about parties and I said that from my point of view, the most interesting story is that of Spain. Podemos reconstituted the Indignados movement as a new kind of left party. It is not a perfect party. It may not in the end play out, but I would like to see something like that happening in the US. I don't think we can continue to hope for the left of the Democratic party.

**TA:** You talked about feminism of the 99% and how we have to do a course correction. You can see the cultural and economic heterogeneity of a country like India, where you have the very educated and the illiterate. So, how do we work out the international feminism you are gearing towards at the macro and micro level?

**NF:** The usual tendency when you scale up is that it becomes more of weight. Who can go to Beijing or Mexico City? Obviously, it is people who have access to resources, who can speak a major world language like English, and so on. That kind of internationalisation is problematic. But there may be a more grass roots-based internationalisation. It is not easy. The current international women's strike which is associated with feminism of the 99% has actually developed networks within Latin America of rather poor women in their organisations. So, they are internationalising theirs. I am not in direct contact, but there is a lot going on in Spain and Italy, especially. Believe it or not, even in Poland and Ireland where the situations are so problematic. So, I think something like this is happening. I am not in close enough touch with the mechanics on the ground to say much more.

**TA:** Your views on marriage. In one of your interviews you talked about revising the institution of marriage by opening it up to gay and lesbians, and also by delinking social rights from it. Do you think a patriarchal institution like marriage is open to such revisions which demand structural changes as well? Why not abandon the institution?

**NF:** I don't have a very firm view and history might go either way. Historically, let us not even focus so much on marriage. Families have been the main units of solidarity and protection. People depend on them, especially the poor. I am not in favour of a single attack on the family. But I am certainly in favour of more egalitarian families, including stronger rights for children, and obviously non-male supremacist families, and yes, gay, lesbian, trans, queer, etc. Some of these people may want to live outside families and as individuals. There are people who prefer that, which is fine. No one should be forced to live in a family. They should have access to social rights. Social rights should not go by family status. They should be available to everyone. I don't know what the future of the family will be. I know it will change, informalise and hopefully become more egalitarian. But will people decide they want to live as bare individuals, I don't know. It is not clear. I don't want to live that way now personally, but I will not impose it on anyone else. And then whatever you do about families, what about children and old people? How are they cared for?

Plato thought that the children of Guardians could be raised in common, early Bolshevism had some interesting ideas, so did Emmeline Pankhurst about collective housekeeping. They thought that you could communise and socialise not only the means of production, but social reproduction as well. It does not have to be a nuclear family. I am agnostic about where we go but people will decide. They will choose. The key question for radicals is to make sure that whatever is chosen is egalitarian and not appropriative, and to make sure that we make these decisions on a footing of parity and equality, and not have it imposed on us by capital.

**TA:** My next question is to do with the emphasis on the sexual female body in the context of sexual democracy and globalisation. What is most problematic is the fact that there is a contradiction in women being seen as both subject of desire and object of male desire, without addressing the hierarchical social structures of their entrapment. Moreover, from your Marxist perspective, the emphasis on desire erases racialised and structural inequalities among women. What are your views?

**NF:** It is a big question. Let me deal with it in a specific way by saying a little bit about the 'me too' movement. At one level, we are especially talking about Hollywood, television, entertainment. These are arenas that are explicitly structured around the sexualisation of the female body. That is what it means to be an actress in Hollywood. The women who work

there know very well that their capital—if you like—is their desirability, their sexuality, in a subjectified way. They know it. At one level that is part of the story.

At another level, the ‘me too’ movement against sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape (which by the way occurs sometimes against men as well: the Kevin Spacey story) is fundamentally not about desire, but it is about work and the workplace. It is about whether you can do your work without being coerced in one way or another to provide sexual satisfaction to someone in power. We hear about this mainly in high profile industries where some of the victims coming forward are already well known and can get media attention.

But this is a much bigger problem in agricultural labour, among cleaning staff in offices and hotels. I am talking about poor and working-class women who have no way to feed their children are much more vulnerable. Indeed, they are very acutely vulnerable because we are talking literally about where the next meal is going to come from.

The other fields, including academia, work differently. It is not so much that we fear abject poverty. What matters is that you are able to develop yourself by reputation. There is a world in which everyone knows which actor is good which is not so good. In academia, who is a good teacher who is not. It is all a world of opinion. You risk something by getting a powerful person like Harvey Weinstein to bad mouth you: ‘I won’t hire her she is no good’. It is a different structure of coercion. It is not that these people are endangered literally in terms of not being able to feed their children. In both cases, we are talking about the structure of the workplace. About the capacity of the powerful agents to abuse and extort sexual goods from less powerful people, even if they are not totally powerless.

**TA:** Thank you for a very important interview.