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Interview

Recognition, Redistribution and Representation in Capitalist Global Society

An Interview with Nancy Fraser

Interviewed by Hanne Marlene Dahl, Pauline Stoltz and Rasmus Willig

Introduction

Nancy Fraser is a Henry A. and Louise Loeb Professor in the Departments of Philosophy and Political Science of the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research, New York, USA, and is considered one of the leading theorists within the 1990s recognition theoretical turn. She works with analyses of contemporary societal developments from a normatively informed position. Her analytical framework is applicable to current, empirical studies of struggles about recognition and she relates them to classic struggles of redistribution. Her thinking is located in the intersection between feminist theory, critical theory and post-structuralism.

In *Justice Interruptus* (1997a) Fraser identifies a shift in the grammar of political claims-making, where struggles for recognition are becoming the paradigmatic form of political conflict and struggles for egalitarian redistribution are declining. In her view, however, recognition and redistribution present two analytically distinct but empirically interrelated reasons for struggle in capitalist, post-Fordist societies, namely struggles about socio-economic (re)distribution, and struggles about cultural recognition such as identity politics. Based on this insight, she outlines a new dual theory of justice encompassing both redistribution and recognition in contrast to the liberal canon of, most notably, John Rawls (1971)[1] and Charles Taylor (1994).[2]

Fraser's accomplishments include the prestigious Tanner Lectures at Stanford University and the Spinoza Lectures at the University of Amsterdam, as well as numerous books and articles, of which *Unruly Practices* (1989), *Justice Interruptus* (1997a) and *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (2003) are the most notable. This last book was written along with Axel Honneth, the successor of Jürgen Habermas at Johann-Wolfgang-Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main, and the director of the Institute for Social Research (Institut für Sozialforschung) as the result of an ongoing debate on the concept of recognition its relation to justice, ethics and social theory. Fraser has also been involved in influential debates with several feminists concerning her theory of justice and the uses (and abuses) of post-structuralist theories (Benhabib et al., 1994; Butler 1997; Young, 1997; Fraser, 1997a, b, c). Expounding a feminist critique of critical theory and introducing the alternative concept of 'subaltern counter publics', she has discussed the male bias of the concept of the public sphere with several other representatives of critical theory, including Jürgen Habermas (Fraser, 1997a).

A lot more could be said about Fraser's work and her theoretical enquiries, but why not let her talk for herself. This interview was undertaken in May 2003 when Fraser visited the

universities of Roskilde and Aarhus in Denmark, participating in seminars and conferences, giving lectures on her own as well as with Axel Honneth. The interview gives an overview of her earlier as well as her recent thinking on the notions of recognition, redistribution and capitalism and discloses her fondness for Weber in relation to her thinking on the importance of status and its theoretical content.

NF: Nancy Fraser
HMD: Hanne Marlene Dahl
PS: Pauline Stoltz
RW: Rasmus Willig

PS: Many people know your books *Unruly Practices* (1989) and *Justice Interruptus* (1997a). In this last book you wrote a famous essay on the notions of redistribution and recognition. Recently, your ongoing conversation with Axel Honneth has resulted in a book entitled *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (2003). Could you describe the development of your own arguments on redistribution and recognition from the mid-1990s to today, in terms of your own arguments, as well as in how these relate to those of Axel Honneth?

NF: From my earliest work in the 1980s, I have always had an interest in the way in which economic inequalities intersect with problems of culture and discourse. An example is my work from the mid-1980s on 'the politics of need interpretation',[3] where I argued that we should think about welfare state politics not only in terms of who gets what, but also in terms of who gets to *interpret* what people need. Of course, this work was not conceptualized in terms of redistribution and recognition, but it nevertheless theorized the intersection of those two dimensions *avant la lettre*. In the 1980s, however, I saw no major obstacles to theorizing the mutual imbrication of economy and culture. On the contrary, I assumed that what I would later call 'the politics of redistribution' and 'the politics of recognition' could synergize easily; thus, I did not envision the need for any special effort to bring them together. That had been my experience, certainly, in the early days of the new social movements, above all in second-wave feminism.

By the 1990s, however, the situation had changed dramatically. By that point, the cultural and economic dimensions of emancipatory struggles were coming apart. Academic feminism, for example, was increasingly divided between a cultural wing, drawn to poststructuralist paradigms of discourse analysis, and a social wing, committed to institutional analysis and political economy. And that split was mirrored in practical politics, where currents working on bread-and-butter distributive issues were progressively more estranged from those seeking to promote women's culture or to parody entrenched gender norms.

At one level, this uncoupling of redistribution and recognition reflected a familiar development in the life cycle of social movements. In the early ascending phase of second-wave feminism, the movement easily encompassed a host of different subcurrents, some more focused on distribution, others more focused on recognition. Later, however, as the movement entered a less expansive phase, the tensions between those currents became apparent, and conflicts began to erupt. This happened not only in feminism but also in other new social movements in the United States and throughout the world. Perhaps its most symptomatic expression was the sense of mutual alienation experienced at the time between trade unions and labour parties, on the one hand, and multiculturalists and 'difference' movements, on the other.

More fundamentally, however, the uncoupling of the politics of recognition from the politics of redistribution reflected a larger historical development: the simultaneous rise of identity

politics, on the one hand, and of global economic neo-liberalism, on the other. It was that conjunction that impelled me to rethink the relation of economy and culture. Earlier, I had seen identity claims from the perspective of progressive moments, as a salutary break with the vulgar economism of previous left politics. But by the 1990s it had become impossible to ignore the rising tide of right-wing chauvinist identity politics. Thus, a more critical view of identitarian versions of recognition claims was in order. The need for such a view seemed all the more pressing to me, in light of the worldwide decline of social egalitarianism and the concomitant rise of free-market neo-liberalism. In this climate, I concluded that the politics of recognition was no longer supplementing and enriching the politics of redistribution. On the contrary, the former was displacing the latter, and that drove me to try in earnest to diagnose what I came to see as an epochal sea change in political culture. Analysing the shift in the grammar of claims-making from 'redistribution to recognition', I argued that we should resist the displacement of redistribution by recognition by developing an integrated conception of justice that could encompass defensible claims of both types. The first chapters of 'Justice Interruptus' reprint papers from the mid-1990s in which I first put forward that line of reasoning.

As a result of these arguments, I soon found myself in an intense dispute with the major theorists of recognition Axel Honneth and Charles Taylor. In fact, Taylor's view is of less interest to me, as he effectively ignores distributive injustice altogether, by focusing exclusively on recognition – and by conceiving the latter in an inadequate way. The case of Honneth is more complicated, because he clearly does want to deal with distributive issues. Nevertheless, he endorses a monistic framework that treats recognition as the sole category of normative reflection, an approach that is, in my view, deeply inadequate. Thus, in our co-authored book (2003), I criticize Honneth's 'recognition monism' on several grounds, including its moral–psychological foundationalism, its ethical sectarianism, and its failure to deal adequately with problems of distributive injustice. As an alternative, I defend a 'perspectival dualist' framework that treats distribution and recognition as two co-fundamental dimensions of justice which are mutually irreducible although practically intertwined.

HMD: In your understanding of recognition, you started out with what in an article in *New Left Review* (2000) you later identified as the identity model. Why this recent shift from an identity model to a status model?

NF: Actually, I never embraced the identity model. My 1995 essay, *From Redistribution to Recognition?* distinguished 'affirmative' from 'transformative' approaches to the politics of recognition. In that essay, I criticized the first approach, which aims to valorize devalued identities, while defending the second, which aims to transform the symbolic order. You are right, of course, that it was not until *Rethinking Recognition* (2000), that I explicitly conceptualized the status model of recognition as such. But my underlying intention has been constant throughout: to defend an approach to the politics of recognition that synergizes with the politics of egalitarian redistribution and avoids essentializing group differences. In both essays, accordingly, I criticized identity politics and defended a non-identitarian politics of recognition.

That said, by 2000, I felt an increased need to sharpen the contrast between these two understandings of the politics of recognition, which I then proceeded to name 'identity' and 'status'. The reason had to do with changes in the political environment – above all the increased salience of right-wing identity politics and the growing tendency of social democrats and egalitarians to reject the politics of recognition altogether. Under these conditions, I felt the need to argue against people, such as Todd Gitlin (1995) and Richard Rorty (1998), who maintained that cultural claims were inherently regressive or 'merely superstructural' – hence that the Left should focus exclusively on economic issues. Convinced that recognition demands contained an indispensable emancipatory moment, which could not be reduced to distributive justice, I sought to avoid throwing out the baby with the bathwater. By reconceptualizing recognition

in terms of status, I was saying in effect: 'Look, what is really important here is not the demand for recognition of a group's specific identity, but the demand for recognition of people's standing as full partners in social interaction, able to participate as peers with others in social life.' That aspiration is fundamental to justice and cannot be satisfied by the politics of redistribution alone. What is required, therefore, is a politics of recognition that aims at establishing status equality, not at validating group identity.

By reconceptualizing recognition as an issue of status, moreover, I was able to show how one could overcome the two main weaknesses of the identity model. First, the status model avoids the identity model's tendency to reification, which fosters repressive communitarianism. This tendency is clear enough in the case of right-wing nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and anti-immigrant movements. But it is also inherent in the so-called 'good' versions of identity politics, such as feminism and multiculturalism. Everyone who has participated in those movements knows how easily identity claims devolve into political correctness. In feminism, for example, efforts to valorize 'women's identity' ended up exerting pressure on participants to be the 'right kind' of woman, while fostering separatism and essentializing gender differences. In contrast, the status model links recognition claims to the normative standard of 'participatory parity'. As result, it forces us to consider what exactly is needed in any given case in order to establish status equality. In some cases, claimants may need to affirm devalued aspects of their identity; in other cases they may need to unburden themselves of excessive 'difference' that others have foisted on them and to emphasize their common humanity; and in still other cases they may need to deconstruct the very terms in which common sense differences are typically elaborated. The effect is to open up a plurality of possible approaches to the politics of recognition. Breaking the conflation of recognition with identity politics, the status model offers the chance of avoiding the reification.

The second problem that this model solves is the need to integrate struggles for recognition with struggles for redistribution. The status model facilitates such integration by putting the focus on institutions. Whereas the identity model locates misrecognition in mental attitudes, free-floating discourses and interpersonal psychology, my approach locates the injustice in institutionalized hierarchies of cultural value that prevent some members of society from participating as peers in social interaction. The result is a different understanding of what it means to overcome misrecognition. Far from seeking to re-engineer people's identities, the status model seeks to deinstitutionalize parity-impeding cultural norms and to replace them with parity-fostering alternatives. This conception also entails a different understanding of the politics of recognition: a non-identitarian politics aimed at establishing status equality by changing social institutions.

HMD: Thinking about status, who on the theoretical level do you think that you are the most closely related to?

NF: I have always understood the problematic of distributive injustice in terms of class stratification. But when I started to analyse misrecognition in terms of status inequality, suddenly a bell rang in my head: class and status, Max Weber! And I remember thinking, 'Oh my goodness, I have somehow in middle age become a Weberian'. Having long considered myself a Marxist, this was not anything I had expected to happen. But there it was. I was arguing, along lines that echoed a major theme of *Economy and Society* (1978), for an account of modern society as comprising two analytically distinct orders of stratification, an economic order of distributive relations that generated inequalities of class and a cultural order of recognition relations that generated inequalities of status. And I was seeking to theorize their mutual entwinement and causal interaction.

As much as I have come to appreciate Weber, however, I am also convinced that his conception of status is not wholly adequate to current conditions. One distinguishing feature of late

modernity (or postmodernity, if you prefer) is the existence of forms of status subordination that do not resemble the classical model, which was developed for 'traditional' societies. Far from comprising a single stable pyramid of relatively fixed status groups, today's status order is a fluid and contested composite of multiple crosscutting cultural distinctions. This does not mean, as some have thought, that we have moved 'from status to contract' and have left behind status inequality. On the contrary, status inequality is alive and well, although it now looks very different. No mere vestige of premodern tradition, status inequality today assumes a thoroughly modern (or post-modern) guise, which cannot be adequately grasped by our classical theories. The upshot is that we need a new conception of status that befits a globalizing world of intense cultural hybridization and contestation. I made a preliminary effort to develop such a conception in *Recognition or Redistribution? A Political–Philosophical Exchange* (2003), but much more work remains to be done. I suspect that several ideas of Pierre Bourdieu will prove very useful in this regard, even if Bourdieu himself sometimes used them reductively; for example, the notion of differentiated fields, where different value patterns predominate; and the notion of different forms of capital – economic, social, symbolic. I would like at some point to draw on such ideas to work up in a systematic way a new conception of status, better suited to current conditions.

HMD: Interesting, such a synthesis is of course something to look forward to. The next question concerns the relationship or the division between ethics and justice. This is, of course, a division which has been much discussed at length by feminists and others. You have a very strong argument against Honneth in that the lack of recognition reflected in cultural imperialism and disrespect is a structural and not an individual matter. I guess my simple question is: What is the difference between structural and individual matters? Could you briefly elaborate on that? And, related, do you still believe that we need a rigid distinction between ethics and justice or do you think that the lines are much fuzzier? So I guess there are two questions, one methodological and a deeper meta-theoretical one.

NF: These are both important questions; and they are certainly related. To explain my view about the relation between individual and structural problems, I need to start with my understanding of justice. For me, a theory of justice cannot, and should not, provide a comprehensive account of the overall goodness or badness of society. Rather, it should allow us to evaluate social arrangements from the perspective of one limited, but extremely important angle: how fair or unfair are the terms of interaction that are institutionalized in the society? Does the society's structural–institutional framework, which sets the ground rules for social interaction, permit all to participate as peers in social interaction? Or does it institutionalize patterns of advantage and disadvantage that systematically prevent some people from participating on terms of parity? Do the society's institutionalized patterns of cultural value create status hierarchies, which impede parity of participation? Does its economic structure create class stratification, which also forecloses the possibility of parity?

In my view, then, justice pertains *by definition* to social structures and institutional frameworks. It follows that individual problems become matters of justice if and when they cumulate into a pattern that can be traced to a systemic cause. When that happens, it becomes clear that what previously looked like the personal problems of isolated individuals are actually injustices rooted in structural features of society. A classic example was the famous 'click' so many women experienced in consciousness-raising groups when they realized that 'the personal is political'. In cases where individual difficulties do not constellate into patterns, then we must conclude that they are not really questions of justice – although it is possible that a pattern will become visible later, at which point we will revise that conclusion. The key point, in any case, is this: Justice pertains *by definition* to social institutions and social structures.

Having said that, I must immediately add that, for me, the individual is the fundamental subject of justice. It is individuals who suffer injustice, even though they do that by virtue of being cast in some group or another. Thus, I reject the communitarian view that groups are the basic normative-ontological units and macro subjects of subjects. In my view, this is bad philosophy and bad sociology, which leads in the end to bad politics. To avoid these problems, one should look first to the concept of justice, and only later to that of ethics, when faced with normative-political disputes. Justice belongs to the sphere of *Moralität*, which does not assume that the disputants share a single view of the good, while ethics belongs to that of *Sittlichkeit*, which does. In my view, efforts to prioritize ethics over justice are untenable for several philosophical reasons. In addition, they are highly unworkable under conditions of cultural pluralism, whether no single value horizon commands the support of all. And such conditions exist today in spades, thanks to the intense transcultural interaction that is a hallmark of globalization. In this situation, we have no choice but to try to adjudicate normative disputes across ethical differences. Consequently, our only option is to shift to the more universal, moral level, appealing to thinner concepts, such as justice, that can encompass a plurality of reasonable views of the good. Failing that, we risk imposing one group's sectarian values on everyone else.

Nevertheless, I am well aware that in any given case the line between justice and ethics is contestable. Usually, philosophers think of justice as entailing obligations that bind everyone, regardless of their particular ethical commitments; in contrast, ethical obligations can rightfully bind only those who embrace the specific horizon of value from which they derive, lest they infringe people's autonomy. Now, as analytically clear as this contrast is, it does not tell us what to do when people disagree as to whether a given perspective belongs to justice or ethics. Abortion is an excellent example: from the standpoint of liberals and feminists, opponents of 'choice' illegitimately seek to impose policies rooted in a sectarian religious perspective on those who do not share that perspective. But those who call themselves 'pro-lifers' see themselves as defenders of universal morality, insofar as they claim to be stopping 'murder'. This is a case, then, and surely there are others, where the distinction between justice and ethics, while analytically clear, is not so easy to draw in practice in a neutral way. We should not conclude, however, that the distinction is invidious or useless. In cases like this, rather, we should treat the distinction reflexively by instituting a process of meta-level discussion and contestation about how and where to draw the line between justice and ethics in the given case.

PS: Globalizing processes like migration raise new questions to the ways in which we view, for instance, social policies of care such as childcare or elderly care. This brings us to the question: 'Who has what rights to care, where and why?' In a common project, Hanne Marlene Dahl and I consider for example presumptions (or silences) in national policy discourses that produce inequalities in gender, ethnicity/'race' and class in care for migrants who become old or who have old relatives in other parts of the world. The logic behind present time and spatial arrangements for care are challenged by migratory processes. In what way do globalizing processes and presumptions of national rather than European or global policy discourses influence your thinking on redistribution and recognition?

NF: This is an extremely important question, which brings us to the heart of the present. In fact, the sorts of developments you mention are central to my current work. They are causing me to revisit my previous account. Originally, as I just explained, I engaged epochal changes in political culture by theorizing a major shift in the grammar of political claims making in the late twentieth century. Noting the relative decline of class struggles and the corresponding rise of identity politics, I postulated a shift 'from redistribution to recognition'. Whereas Fordist-era movements had couched their claims in the language of distributive justice,

post-Fordist movements were more disposed to make claims for the recognition of identity and difference. My response, as I've just explained, was to develop a two-dimensional model of justice that could accommodate claims of both types.

Today, however, this response no longer seems entirely satisfactory. Rather, it captured a transitional aspect of what I now regard as a deeper change in the circumstances of justice. Put simply, the redistribution/recognition model responded to the destabilization of the postwar paradigm, which had shunted political claims into the redistributionist channels of the Keynesian welfare state. Writing in the mid-1990s, I could see that post-Fordism and post-communism had ruptured that paradigm, releasing political conflicts over status, which had previously been relegated to the margins, mere subtexts of distributive problems. Wishing to embrace what was emancipatory in the new struggles for recognition, without minimizing the importance of distribution, I sought to integrate both dimensions in a broader theory of social justice. What I did not fully understand was that these same developments were also problematizing the Westphalian territorial-state frame within which struggles for justice *of every kind* had previously been confined. As a result, I failed to grasp their full implications for the theory of justice.

Today, in contrast, I maintain that an adequate theory of justice must be *three-dimensional*. The reason is that the acceleration of globalization has fundamentally transformed the circumstances of justice – by altering the scale of social interaction and decentring the Westphalian territorial-state frame. Today, accordingly, the national framing of political claims-making no longer goes without saying. On the contrary, from Chiapas to Kosovo, from international feminism to the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, the characteristic conflicts of the present exceed that frame. Far from taking for granted existing national and international structures of governance, such struggles suggest that justice may require decision-making in a different frame. Under these conditions, neither distribution nor recognition can be properly understood without explicit reference to the problem of frame. Both those dimensions of justice must be resituated in relation to another major aspect of social normativity, which was neglected in my previous work. Henceforth, redistribution and recognition must be related to *representation*, which allows us to problematize governance structures and decision-making procedures. Explicitly thematizing the problem of the frame, this notion points to yet another class of obstacles to justice: neither economic nor cultural, but political. Representation, accordingly, constitutes a third, *political* dimension of social justice, alongside the (economic) dimension of redistribution and the (cultural) dimension of recognition. And so I am now beginning work on a new book, tentatively entitled *Postwestphalian Democratic Justice*, in which I hope to work out the theoretical and practical implications. (This move, by the way, reinforces my own Weberianism, since Weber's distinction was always tripartite: not just class and status, but class, status and party.)

RW: The last question is about your analysis of capitalist society in the book co-authored by you and Axel Honneth entitled *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (2003). You have a common statement in the foreword, where you indicate that you try to conceptualize capitalist society as a totality. Could you please elaborate on what you mean by this attempt to conceptualize capitalist society as a totality?

NF: First of all, I should say that in answering this question I will speak only for myself. Although Axel Honneth and I agree on the main outlines of this issue, he might not endorse every nuance of my account of it. As someone who wants to update the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory, I endorse the latter's interdisciplinary ambitions. I want to combine in a single project several styles of intellectual work that are usually kept apart: a historically informed diagnosis of the current conjuncture, including the contradictions and emancipator possibilities that mark our time; an empirically informed social theory of contemporary

society, including its basic structures and institutional frameworks, the mechanisms by which they generate injustices, and the nature and extent of the latter; a discursively sensitive account of current political cultures and political conflicts, including the shape of contemporary struggles, the grammar of political claims-making, and the extant folk paradigms of social justice; a normative philosophical theory of justice, which allows us to distinguish warranted from unwarranted claims; and a political theory that provides guidance in matters of institutional design, enabling us to evaluate alternative proposals for remedying injustice. In my view, all these components of critical theory are necessary, none is sufficient, and all enrich and cross-fertilize one another. But current pressures toward academic specialization are driving them apart. Sadly, many of my friends and colleagues, who also identify with Critical Theory, have renounced these interdisciplinary ambitions. They are working exclusively on one or another subfield, such as constitutional theory or free-standing moral philosophy. I respect this work enormously and learn a great deal from it; and I certainly appreciate the gains of specialization, which permits one to delve very deeply into something and to produce something quite sophisticated and sound. Nevertheless, I fear that this approach risks losing what was most distinctive and valuable about Critical Theory: its ambition to provide a big picture that allows us to situate ourselves historically and to orient ourselves politically. So I defend the continued importance and the continued validity of that sort of 'grand theorizing'. Of course, I am well aware of the pitfalls that attend this sort of theorizing, the various ways in which it can go bad, including the temptation to premature, false totalization. But the potential gains are so important that I am willing to take the risk.

What was especially interesting about the process of writing *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (2003) was the realization that Honneth and I agreed on this point. The sense that we shared the desire to retrieve the totalizing ambitions of Critical Theory emerged quite spontaneously, even as we were engaged in a fierce debate about how best to do so. In retrospect I think it was this shared premise that made the argument especially so fruitful. As work on the book progressed, we realized that we were really arguing largely about how best to understand contemporary capitalism – not only as an economic system, but also as a form of life. And that seems to me so important at the present moment. Certainly, as we confront the growing tide of globalizing neo-liberalism, we should not forget to theorize capitalism!

RW + PS + HMD: Thank you very much.

NF: You are welcome.

Notes

1. Rawls mentions the distribution of primary goods as the basis for justice, where one of the primary goods is 'the basis of self-respect' that can be grouped under a politics of recognition.
2. Well known for his work on multiculturalism.
3. The politics of need interpretation is an analytical model developed for, among others, the analysis of social policies (Fraser, 1989).

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