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Contesting Capitalism

Class struggles and boundary struggles

Jaeggi: Let's talk about what follows from our broader view of capitalism for the question of social struggles. The traditional Marxist idea was that *class struggle* is the most characteristic and potentially emancipatory form of conflict in capitalist society. This was based on a certain conception of history and the way capitalism was organized. You've argued that what we are faced with today are *boundary struggles*, a view that is drawn from your broader account of capitalism as an institutionalized social order. How do boundary struggles relate to the idea of class struggle?

Fraser: It's true that my view of capitalism implies a different account of social struggle from the one widely associated with Marxism. By conceiving capitalism as something larger than an economic system, it renders visible, and intelligible, a broader spectrum of social contestation than orthodox paradigms do. Let me mention three specific ways in which the view of capitalism as an institutionalized social order enriches our understanding of social struggle.

First, this view discloses the structural bases in capitalist society of axes of domination other than class. We saw, for example, that gender domination is built into capitalism's institutional separation of production from reproduction; also, that domination along axes of race, nationality, and citizenship is inscribed in its separations of exploitation from expropriation and of core from periphery. This helps to explain why struggles along these axes arise so frequently in the course of capitalist development. That can only appear as a mystery to approaches that equate capitalism with its official economy and identify its primary injustice with capital's exploitation of wage labor. The mystery dissolves, however, when capitalism is viewed as an institutionalized social order premised on foreground/background divisions. Seen that way, struggles against racism, imperialism, and sexism respond to forms of domination that are every bit as real, unjust, and deeply anchored in capitalist society as those that give rise to class struggles. Perfectly intelligible responses to structural harms, they are neither expressions of "secondary contradictions" nor embodiments of "false consciousness." So that's the first way in which my perspective expands our picture of social struggle in capitalist society: it discloses the salience of struggles along axes of domination other than class.

But that idea is complicated by a second one, which casts doubt on the standard definition of "class struggle." For orthodox Marxists, such struggle is centered on the conflict between labor and capital, where labor is defined narrowly as waged work, especially in industrial factory settings. Those who do this work appear, along with the capitalists who employ them, as the paradigmatic protagonists of class struggle. The iconic site of such struggle is "the point of production," where the two sides meet face to face. Struggles that originate there are thought to nurture the most advanced class consciousness and to be most likely to become revolutionary. They are supposed to pose the deepest challenge to capitalism and to have the greatest potential for emancipatory social transformation.

I find this view of class struggle problematic because it excludes struggles over unwaged and expropriated work. The latter are not counted as class struggles, just as those who perform such work are not counted as "workers." On my view, by contrast, the "hidden abodes" that support wage labor are domains of socially necessary work, while the propertyless people employed in those domains are "workers" whose struggles should count as class struggles. This holds for those who replenish and reproduce the labor power on which exploitation depends; for those who cultivate resources that are confiscated and funneled into accumulation; and for those who sustain the habitats and historical natures on which commodity production relies. Granted, their struggles often occur far from the point of production and are typically shaped by other axes of domination, including gender and race. But they are often directed against fractions of the capitalist class and its political agents; and they concern

processes that contribute at least indirectly to the accumulation of surplus value. Capitalism, broadly conceived, entails an expanded view of “the working class” and an enlarged understanding of “class struggle.”

There is also a third way in which my view enlarges our view of social struggle in capitalist society. Inspired in part by the thought of Polanyi, it treats capitalism’s constitutive institutional boundaries as likely sites and stakes of struggle. What I have called “boundary struggles” emerge not from “inside” the economy, but at the points where production meets reproduction, economy meets polity, and human society meets non-human nature. As nodes of contradiction and potential crisis, these boundaries are both sites and stakes of struggle: at once locations where conflict erupts and objects of contestation. No surprise, then, that struggles over nature, social reproduction, and public power arise so regularly in the course of capitalist development. Far from constituting a theoretical embarrassment, they are deeply grounded in the institutional structure of capitalist society – as deeply grounded as class struggles in the narrow sense. They cannot be dismissed as secondary or superstructural.

In all three of these respects, therefore, an expanded view of capitalism entails an expanded view of social struggle in capitalist society. This point is of very great practical significance. On the one hand, we should expect to encounter multiple forms of structurally grounded social conflict, all of which represent, at least in principle, pertinent responses to capitalist crisis and potential sources of transformation. On the other hand, the struggles in question are heterogeneous and do not automatically harmonize or converge on a single trajectory, as class struggle was supposed to do in the orthodox view. Practically speaking, therefore, my view of capitalism offers both expanded prospects and intensified challenges.

Jaeggi: The concept of “boundary struggles” strikes me as a productive one. And I find the whole tableau you are offering really fascinating. But I am still trying to figure out whether it amounts to an *addition to* or a *replacement of* class struggle. There were certain strands in early critical theory that suggested this latter notion – giving up on the proletariat as the motor of history, as it were – though who would take its place remained an open question (Marcuse, with his focus on new needs and marginalized groups, was the only one who had a new revolutionary subject in mind¹). In any case, it’s clear that you don’t stand for that gesture, so what is the relation between boundary struggles and class struggle in your account? Is class struggle a form of boundary struggles? Are boundary struggles a form of class struggle?

Fraser: It follows from what I just said that boundary struggles are neither additions to nor replacements for class struggles in the narrow sense. Rather, this concept belongs in the same conceptual framework as the expanded view of class struggle I just outlined, which also includes struggles over unwaged and expropriated labor, including social reproduction, and over the natural and political conditions that support it. Boundary struggles overlap with and entwine with class struggles in this expanded sense, just as they overlap with and entwine with gender struggles and with struggles over racial oppression and imperial predation. In fact, I would say the distinction is in large part a matter of perspective. To use the expression “boundary struggles” is to focus on the way in which social conflict centers on and contests capitalism’s constitutive institutional separations. To use the (expanded) concept of class struggle is, by contrast, to focus on the group divisions and power asymmetries that correlate with those separations. In many cases, if not all, one and the same social struggle can be usefully viewed from both perspectives. In fact, I would say that in such cases it *should* be viewed from both perspectives. To see it exclusively through the lens of class (or, for that matter, of gender or race) is to miss the underlying structural-institutional features of capitalist societies with which domination is entwined and through which it is organized. But the converse is also true. To view such a struggle exclusively from the boundary vantage is to miss the social fault lines and relations of domination to which those institutional divisions give rise.

What I’m saying is that the distinction between class and boundary struggles is analytical. In the real world, many social conflicts contain elements of both. To understand them adequately, critical theorists need to bring both perspectives to bear, asking for any case: Are both boundary and class (or gender or race) divisions in play? If so, do the participants recognize and thematize both aspects? Or

do they focus exclusively on one – for example, by stressing the class (or gender or race) elements and glossing over the boundary elements, or vice versa? Are those two elements set in tension with one another or are they harmonized? When we look at struggles in this bi-perspectival way, we gain access to a whole new set of questions, which allow us to probe “the struggles and wishes of our age” in a deeper, more critical way.

Recall our discussion, in [chapter 2](#), about struggles over social reproduction. We spoke there about the tendency of early capitalist industrialization to undermine possibilities for family life; about the provisional solution afforded by social democracy; and about the latter’s unraveling in contemporary financialized capitalism. At each stage, the boundary dividing social reproduction from economic production emerged as a major site and central stake of social struggle. The contestation in every phase fits squarely within the category of boundary struggles. But those struggles intersected with and were overdetermined by the fault lines of race/ethnicity, gender, and class, now understood in a broader sense.

This is clearly the case today. In the present conjuncture, we encounter at least two distinct class responses to financialized capitalism’s weakening of the boundary between social reproduction and economic production. At one end of the spectrum, we find the responses of the poor and working classes, who scramble as best they can to care for their families in the interstices, while working long hours at multiple low-wage McJobs. Some of them have joined populist movements that promise to protect them from a social machine that eats up their time, their energies, and their ability to sustain social connections and to reproduce a common life that they can recognize as good – or even human. At the other end, we find the responses of the professional–managerial strata, who embody the high-end variant of the two-earner family, in which qualified women pursue demanding professions, while subcontracting out their traditional carework to low-waged immigrants or racial/ethnic minorities. The result, as I said before, is a dualized organization of social reproduction: commodified for those who can pay for it, privatized for those who cannot, with some in the second group performing it for very low wages for those in the first. Those at the upper end move more of their lives onto the economy side of the boundary – the paid work side – while those at the lower end shift more of their responsibilities onto kin and community networks, which means to the unpaid side. At both ends, struggles erupt over and at the boundaries separating society, market, and state. And these struggles are overdetermined by questions of class. Under the right conditions, the class dimension could become explicit, disclosing the imbrication of class struggles with boundary struggles. And that is in principle how things should be. In fact, I would say there is something wrong if a struggle with a clear class dimension is not politicized in these terms. Important aspects of the situation are distorted or suppressed if the class dimension doesn’t become explicit.

Jaeggi: This raises the possibility that social movements can emerge but fail to address these kinds of tensions and contradictions in a certain vocabulary. Would you say that all these conflicts and contradictions *must* be expressed as class struggles if they are to be rightfully expressed?

Fraser: My answer is “yes” and “no.” When the class element of struggles is suppressed – say, by something in the prevailing political culture – and does not become an explicit focus of struggle, then something is wrong. Among other things, this opens the door to scapegoating and other regressive forms of political expression. But that doesn’t mean that every social struggle must be expressed *only* or *above all* as a class struggle – at least not in the narrow, orthodox sense.

In the example we were just discussing, the class element is deeply intertwined with a strong gender element. As we know, the capitalist division between production and reproduction has historically been a gendered division, and the fallout from this initial gendering by no means disappeared, but has rather been remade, in different periods in capitalism’s history. This division is also cross-cut by dimensions of race, ethnicity, and nationality as well, as it’s largely immigrants and people of color who are saddled with the low-paid precarious carework that was previously the unpaid responsibility of middle-class White women. But to say that the problem has a crucial class element does not mean going back to some oversimplified view that class is the “real” issue, while race and gender are epiphenomenal. On the contrary, I would also insist on the converse of what I just said about class:

when the gender and race/ethnicity/national dimensions are suppressed, something has gone deeply wrong.

Jaeggi: There seem to be dimensions of boundary struggles that can't be covered by the vocabulary of class, where it just wouldn't make sense to translate it into a class struggle.

Fraser: Well, as I just said, gender and racial/ethnic domination are just as pervasive and deeply entrenched in capitalist society as class domination is. So, we really should expand your question to encompass those social fault lines as well. In any case, I will respond by returning to our discussion in [chapter 3](#) about the need to integrate several different genres of critique. The implication there was that there are multiple, overdetermined reasons for criticizing capitalism's major institutionalized separations, reasons embodying all the various strands of critique we discussed in that chapter. One of the reasons I stressed refers directly to class: capitalism entrenches normatively unjustifiable structures of domination along class lines – but, also, along other cross-cutting axes: gender, race/ethnicity, nationality. That was the “moral” critique of capitalism, which targets its inherent injustice or unfairness. But the two other reasons I gave don't refer directly to class – nor to any other relations of domination. First, capitalism's way of organizing social life is inherently prone to crisis in several respects: ecological, economic, political, social. That's the so-called functionalist critique. And, second, capitalism subjects everyone, not just the dominated, to the blind coercive force of the law of value and deprives all of us of our freedom to organize our life-activities and consciously to establish our connections to past and future generations and to non-human nature. That's the “freedom” critique.

As I said, neither the functionalist nor the freedom critique refers explicitly to class – nor, for that matter, to race and gender. Crisis and heteronomy affect everyone. And yet they nevertheless carry class subtexts – but also race and gender subtexts. The most acute expressions of crisis fall disproportionately on the poor and working classes, especially on women and people of color; and it is those populations who are most disadvantaged by the denial of collective autonomy. That suggests to me that, while the three critiques are analytically distinct, the conditions they target are thoroughly inter-imbricated in social reality. Practically speaking, then, the class injustice question cannot in the end be definitively separated from the crisis and freedom questions. All must be addressed together – as must capitalism's other major axes of injustice, including gender, race/ethnicity, and imperialism.

Jaeggi: We both reject giving an “essentialist” account of boundaries, whereby some given criteria such as “the conditions of human nature” can be used to dictate how various spheres should be separated or related to each other, and to delimit the proper domain of each. But if we've rejected the essentialist version, doesn't this mean that even a “classless society” (were we to get there) would still have to feature legitimate ongoing political conflicts about boundaries? These conflicts may take place under different conditions, but it seems there would still be one part of what it means to live in a democratic society that involves constantly having to negotiate and renegotiate these boundaries, even if the problem of class has been resolved.

Fraser: I fully agree that a classless, democratic society would not be a society without tensions, disagreements, or conflicts. And I would add that such a society would provide its members plenty to disagree about: for example, our relation to non-human nature, the organization of work, its relation to family and community life, as well as to political organization (local, national, regional, global). In fact, such disagreements would be more explicit than they are now, because these matters would be treated as political questions, to be submitted to democratic resolution, instead of being stealthily devolved to capital and to “market forces” protected from challenge by pre-existing, nonnegotiable boundaries. But that's the point. Capitalism's institutional structure removes all these issues from democratic contestation and resolution. And, even on those occasions when it does permit us to entertain them, the terms of debate are grossly lopsided – tainted by all the fault lines of domination we've been discussing, not to mention public spheres dominated by corporate for-profit media and by the penetration of private money into elections. So, while a postcapitalist alternative would not (indeed, should not!) eliminate such contention – and would probably in fact increase it – it would assure far fairer terms for processing and resolving disagreements.

Of course, that still leaves open the question of what a postcapitalist alternative should look like. It is often said – and I agree – that critical theory cannot fully pre-decide this. Many specific features of a “good society” must be left to the imagination and desires of the participants. But still, some things are clear. First, no acceptable “solution” can come off the backs of any given identifiable stratum of the population, whether defined by class, race/ethnicity, or gender, or by any other entrenched relation of domination.

Second, the economy/polity relation is especially crucial, and must be considered with nuance and care. On the one hand, we need to take on board Marx’s famous critique of the way that division operates to protect capital in a bourgeois society. I am thinking especially of his essay “On the Jewish Question,” where he criticized a “merely political” emancipation that expels the entire economic process from the precincts of political life, while also glossing the resulting domination as “democratic.”² This critique is often reduced to the idea that Marx didn’t value bourgeois rights and dismissed them as just another layer of ideology. Frankly, I find this reductionist reading irritating, because that wasn’t his point at all. I think it is a very powerful and telling critique, which must inform our critical theory of capitalist society.

Nevertheless, our critique must also be informed by a counterconsideration, which I draw from the experience of “really existing socialism” of the Soviet type. Those regimes tried simply to “liquidate” the capitalist division between polity and economy, establishing command economies directed by the Party-State; and that proved truly disastrous in many senses. We might draw the lesson that we can’t live with the existing capitalist form of the polity/economy division, but nor can we live by liquidating the latter entirely. We need to consider alternatives to both those extremes: for example, democratic planning, participatory budgeting, or market-socialism, combining “political” and “economic” forms of coordination. I recall a brilliant essay from 1988 by Diane Elson that outlined some extremely interesting ideas about this.³

The Left needs to devote much more attention to such questions. And the same is true for parallel questions concerning the production/ reproduction division and the human society / non-human nature division. Those divisions too cannot be simply liquidated. Rather, they need to be creatively re-imagined in ways that detach them from domination, enhance collective autonomy, and render the life-forms they structure less antagonistic vis-à-vis one another.

Boundary struggles and contemporary social movements

Jaeggi: Let’s shift our focus to the nature of these boundary struggles on their own terms. What are these struggles about in relation to these institutionalized separations and spheres? We can understand the idea of a boundary struggle in a couple of ways. One account would come very close to Habermas’s colonization thesis. We have these various institutionalized spheres – economic, political, reproductive, etc. – and boundary struggles occur when one sphere “invades” another and this other is trying to push back. But we could also envision a more radical kind of boundary struggle. On this account, the struggle wouldn’t be just a matter of protecting the lifeworld from colonization or, say, the political sphere from the economic sphere (we’ve already discussed reasons to find this image problematic). Rather, it would be more proactively about the “shape” of these spheres, where to draw or re-draw the lines between them, or whether even to have a line at all. As we noted earlier, the feudal order did not have the same kind of separation between economy and polity, state and society. It’s a specific feature of bourgeois-capitalist society that the economy is viewed as something distinct, and it is against the background of this initial boundarydrawing that certain disavowals are ideologically established to make the market economy appear as if it were fully independent.

So, which is it? Do boundary struggles have to do with fighting off invasion across an otherwise clear boundary, or is it a struggle over whether it would be reasonable to draw the line differently, to repoliticize the economy or to bring economics back into a richer mode of social life?

Fraser: All of the above. Boundary struggles come in many flavors, including the ones that you just

elaborated. They can be *defensive*, aimed at repulsing an invasion, incursion, or slippage across a boundary, which is experienced as problematic. Defensive struggles arise in cases where people are more or less satisfied with an existing or past arrangement that's being eroded and find themselves "pushed too far into a corner." They want to shift the boundary back to where it was before. But that does not exhaust the concept. There are also *offensive* boundary struggles. The neoliberal project was precisely aimed at extending the domain of matters subjected to an economizing logic of market relations. And some anti-systemic movements have responded offensively, not by trying to defend the old boundary, but by trying to push it further in the other direction, so as to bring matters previously treated as "economic" into the domain of the "political."

But we could also distinguish boundary struggles in other terms. For example, I would distinguish between *affirmative* and *transformative* boundary struggles. I first introduced this distinction in another context,⁴ but I think it is useful here as well. By an affirmative struggle, I mean one whose proponents assume that a given institutional boundary should exist in more or less its present form, while insisting that it is currently situated in the wrong place. They want only to shift its location. By contrast, those engaged in transformative struggle maintain that the problem is not just the boundary's location but its very existence, its character, or the process by which and by whom it was drawn. They want to change the arrangement's deep structure, if not to abolish the boundary altogether.

I should add that the affirmative/transformative distinction is more complicated than it first seems, because of the possibility of "nonreformist reforms." That was Andre Gorz's expression for struggles that are affirmative by any strict measure, but that nevertheless give rise to transformative effects because they alter relations of power and thereby open a path for further struggles that become increasingly radical over time.⁵ Struggles over the economy/polity boundary are especially susceptible to this dynamic. Initially modest-seeming reforms aimed at conquering more ground for democratic politics can set in motion a democratizing logic that picks up speed as it goes along, leading eventually to a major transformation of capitalism's structural-institutional order.

I should also mention struggles over whether a given boundary should be "hard" or "soft," impenetrable or porous. Also "meta" struggles over the processes by which boundaries should be drawn. All of these questions could easily invite transformative answers. But the point is that boundary struggles come in a variety of forms. Everything I have mentioned here (and more!) counts as an instance of boundary struggle.

Jaeggi: So, this seems to be a distinction about the radicalness of the struggles in question, which is simultaneously linked to their normative assessment. It is fair to say that Marxists have at times gone overboard in trying to label which movements were "on the right side of history" and keeping pace with the development of the means of production. Only these could be emancipatory, and all the others would be deemed regressive. Even Marx was not immune to this kind of thinking, even if he, later on, arrived at a more differentiated picture. You seem to start from a situation of greater ambivalence from the outset. So, would you say that, with an eye on boundaries, we will always encounter struggles that have multiple faces at once?

Fraser: Actually, I haven't yet said anything at all about how we should make normative assessments of boundary struggles. And in fact, as I shall explain later on, I would not recommend that we approve or disapprove of them according to how radical they are. Here, however, I am making a different point – which is that boundary struggles come in different kinds: they can be defensive or offensive, affirmative or transformative. But the same is true of class struggles. They too are all over the map: in some cases, defensive; in others, offensive; in some cases, affirmative – as, for example, when they seek shorter hours and higher wages; in other cases, transformative – as when they aim to transform property relations and the process by which surplus value is created and distributed. Both boundary struggles and class struggles admit of a variety of different forms and degrees of radicalism.

We could develop this point by returning to the previous discussion of "liquidationism," by which I mean projects aimed at eliminating a boundary altogether, such as the Soviet effort to liquidate the polity/economy division. We can see that as one extreme on a spectrum. The other extreme is

“prohibitionism,” in which social actors aim not only to establish a boundary but to make it virtually impenetrable. In US history, the term is associated with the Temperance Movement, which sought to prohibit the sale and consumption of alcohol. But we could also use the term for those feminists who seek to outlaw all commodification of sex, reproduction, and carework, or for those “deep” ecologists who oppose all buying and selling of land or mineral wealth and so on.

Jaeggi: So, the lesson is that the more transformative and “boundarysmashing” types of struggle are not automatically the more emancipatory ones. Where would you situate yourself between these extremes of liquidationism and prohibitionism?

Fraser: Right. Some transformative claims are quite unsavory. Fascist states sought to instrumentalize reproduction in ways that were at once deeply transformative of established boundaries and utterly regressive. Conversely, some affirmative claims are normatively justified – for example, campaign finance reform. What this shows is that normative assessments depend on other considerations – for example, on whether proposed boundary revisions would mitigate domination, enhance freedom, and promote the right kind of social security.

But you asked about liquidationism. I myself would not recommend complete liquidation of capitalism’s constitutive boundaries, as I already explained. Nor would I support full-out prohibition, which is usually defensive and essentialist. I’d focus instead on the process of boundary-making, militating for a new, more democratic way of drawing boundaries. And I’d also support multiplication of possibilities. This entails thinking about what it might mean to soften, harden, or relocate institutional boundaries. It also requires weighing the pros and cons of doing things in one way versus another. Right now, capitalism already does all this for us. These questions have been taken out of our hands, and part of what it means to have a more radical or transformative way of thinking about the current crisis is to raise the question of boundaries to a higher level of conscious, collective self-determination. What exactly we decide upon is one thing, but that it should be a matter of collective self-determination is something else.

And the fact is, there are many useful ways in which we can think about boundaries and the struggles that can be waged over them. I’d say we have a lot to learn from social and political geographers who work on the dynamics of “spatialization.” They distinguish “hard” from “soft” boundaries. They highlight not only what boundaries separate but also what they connect. Critical theorists should take such insights on board.

All of this is grist for my central argument. As an institutionalized social order, capitalism is centrally built on the construction and transgression of boundaries. It follows that any politics that seeks to reform, reject, or surpass capitalism must place the boundary question front and center.

Jaeggi: So, your model gives us a lot of possibilities, but it also leaves us with a rather messy picture. I want to press you further about the socio-theoretical and normative issues at stake. And perhaps we can use the Habermasian position as a foil. Habermas’s colonization thesis revolves around a struggle over the boundary between lifeworld and system, and it is framed in such a way that the relevant boundary is, normatively speaking, already in place. For Habermas, there is a type of defensive boundary struggle that is normatively permissible, or even required, since there are parts of the lifeworld in which the system shouldn’t intervene. By contrast, offensive struggles aimed at eliminating the functional differentiation of modern society would be pre-modern, regressive, potentially even bordering on fascism. In his view, we need both the lifeworld and the system, and we need the boundary to keep each in its proper place.

I’ve mentioned before why I find this account fundamentally flawed, on a number of grounds. At the same time, Habermas’s framework is at least able to provide us with a clear-cut way to distinguish regressive from emancipatory boundary struggles. It is this feature that gives Habermas’s thesis a certain normative impact, which I do not yet see in your account of boundary struggles. How might we derive a comparable standard from your account? This is what I mean when I say you leave us with a somewhat messy picture. We’ve agreed that we don’t want to rely on an essentialist view of these spheres and boundaries, but how do we determine what kinds of radical boundary questioning are

emancipatory and what kinds are not? You seem to imply there is no clear-cut distinction. Even struggles aimed at re-drawing the line between certain spheres can be legitimate from an emancipatory point of view – that is, they do not *have* to be pre-modern in a “bad” or regressive way. So how do we decide which are the regressive or emancipatory moments? How do we distinguish “progressive” from “regressive” struggles and social movements without some kind of a normative standard?

Fraser: I agree with the premises that underlie your question. I agree, first, that Habermas establishes a pre-given, a priori normative boundary, which can be breached from either of two directions: from the system side, as when administrative or market forces begin to colonize the lifeworld; or from the lifeworld side, as when radical socialists or anarchists seek to “de-differentiate” those institutions and thereby to “regress” and surrender the “achievements of modernity.” Either way, a fundamental imperative, rooted in the very nature of things, is violated. Like you, I reject that approach. I also agree, second, with the conclusion you draw from that point. Once we reject the Habermasian solution, we have to find an alternative basis for assessing the emancipatory potential of various movements, political programs, and ideas. So far, so good. Failing that, our critical theory lacks critical force. So, yes, I agree. Evaluative criteria are essential.

In fact, the view of capitalism I’ve offered here provides three normative criteria for distinguishing emancipatory from non-emancipatory claims about capitalism’s boundaries. As I’ve already explained, the first criterion is *nondomination*. Capitalism’s institutional separations entrench deep-seated relations of domination, along lines of gender, race/ethnicity, and class. No proposal to revise those institutional boundaries is normatively acceptable if it reinforces or exacerbates such domination. The nondomination principle rules out proposed alternatives that institutionalize the subordination of a designated group or groups of social actors.

The second criterion is *functional sustainability*: any proposal has to be sustainable. It has to be able to become institutionalized in a social order with the capacity to stabilize itself over time. It can’t be set up in a way that generates constant turmoil, and it can’t be premised on dynamics that lead it to destabilize its own preconditions of existence. We don’t require (or want!) perfect, rigid stability, of course. But we do need sustainability.

The third criterion is *democracy*. Any acceptable proposal must be able to be institutionalized in such a way that participants remain able to reflect on it, question it, decide whether it’s working for them or not, and change it if necessary.

My view is that the three criteria should be used together, as a toolkit. To be acceptable, a proposed structural transformation must satisfy all three. I suspect that, if we apply them in that way, we’d discover that some projects that today present themselves as emancipatory do not in fact pass muster.

Jaeggi: This is certainly a helpful toolkit, and I do like the mix of deontological, functional, and quasi-ethical requirements. Still, I’m concerned about the somewhat “external” and freestanding character of it. I’m still convinced there might be a more immanent approach that involves looking directly at the very dynamics of these struggles. We might be able then to assess the emancipatory potential of these movements by referring to their regressive or non-regressive dynamics. The framework of a crisis analysis should give us a clue here. Boundary struggles do not spring up out of nowhere; they are motivated by problems and crises such that existing practices and institutions “no longer function,” because they erode their own resources for sustaining themselves or they run up against problems or contradictions they cannot resolve. And, as we discussed in [chapter 3](#), we might distinguish adequate and non-adequate ways to address a crisis in terms of learning processes or the absence of learning blockages.

Fraser: Well, I remain eager to see how you develop your intuitions about learning processes and learning blockages. But I don’t see anything freestanding or external about my proposal, which *does* derive from the framework of a crisis analysis. The contents of my “toolkit” flow directly from the account I gave of capitalism’s crisis tendencies in [chapters 1](#) and [2](#). What I said there was that boundary struggles respond to crisis tendencies of the Polanyian type that are inherent in capitalist societies. They respond, that is, to the built-in tendency of a capitalist economy to destabilize its own

“non-economic” background conditions of possibility: social reproduction, public power, sustainable natures, and a habitable planet. In crisis periods, the established regime of accumulation loses its ability to soften and defuse these contradictions. Processes and relations that seemed unproblematic before now appear dysfunctional, unjust, and/or bad, and become subject to contestation. Drawing on the normative resources available to them, social actors invoke ideals, values, and principles that are entrenched in the institutional order they inhabit: especially, principles of freedom, equal citizenship, and the public good associated with the political; ideals of care, mutual aid, and solidarity associated with social reproduction; values of harmony, sustainability, and stewardship associated with socioecology; and norms of rationality, equal exchange, and choice associated with economy. These normative resources are embedded in the very texture of social life in a capitalist society, which is why they are accessible to its inhabitants. But, in crisis periods, people use them in a different and potentially explosive way – not just to dispute specific actions within a given, “proper” sphere, but to impugn social relations elsewhere, in the “wrong” sphere, or to problematize the divisions between spheres. These claims themselves must be vetted, not simply taken at face value. The criteria I just evoked for that purpose (nondomination, functional sustainability, and democracy) are themselves generalizations of the first-order norms that participants use – which means that they too are accessible to them. Far from being freestanding or external, they stand in a relation of immanence to capitalist society, even as they also have the capacity to point beyond it.

Jaeggi: There’s no denying that your criteria are perfect for engaging in a normative heuristic of existing social movements. Since, as you said, the picture is complicated, we could try and spell this out with respect to existing social struggles and movements. Why don’t we start with anarchism, which has become quite trendy among young leftists in the Global North?

Anarchism

Fraser: That’s a good starting point, with the potential to yield some important insights. The forms of neo-anarchism I encounter these days, including among some of my students, seem to me to fall short on all three criteria. That’s clearly the case with the functionality criterion. Just imagine applying that test to the Occupy Wall Street-type of encampment, which is a “constant meeting,” where everything is decided by consensus, with no voting, no leaders, and no organizational structure. If this practice is intended to prefigure a new form of societal organization, it is hard to see how it could be sustainable over time, given the burn-out factor. And the practice also falls short on the non-domination criterion, as it privileges those who are in a position to invest lots of time in assemblies – people who don’t have day jobs, children, or other demanding commitments – while providing no way to protect the interests of those who do have such commitments and cannot participate continuously. Obviously, this runs afoul of the democratic criterion as well. But perhaps what I’m saying here is not fully fair. Perhaps we should distinguish anarchism as a program for restructuring social organization from anarchism as a transitional organizing modus.

Jaeggi: Yes, we should consider anarchism from both of those angles. And we shouldn’t be too hard on the Occupy movement, which had to organize everything necessary to sustain a lengthy stay at Zuccotti Park. Moreover, some of the issues you raised are not specific to anarchism; they are problems for social movements in general. Grassroots movements are complicated to organize, especially in the face of outside pressure. Present-day society is hardly amenable to just setting people free for a while to get organized and mobilized. All types of movements involve people who are under various kinds of constraints. I would say there are a lot of anarchist experiments today that are actively trying to find different solutions to the problem of domination, with efforts to devise ways of avoiding certain kinds of gender structures and various kinds of hierarchies, as well as efforts to think about alternative forms of representation beyond traditional, “bourgeois” forms. There are also attempts to deal with the problem of involving people who don’t have the same amount of free time as students, who are typically the most active in these kinds of projects.

Fraser: You may be right that I underestimate the level of awareness of these problems and the thoughtfulness with which they have sometimes been treated in the anarchist tradition. But I still have

criticisms of anarchism both as a form of organizing and as a program. As a form of organizing, the anarchist strategy tends to be more about evading, circumventing, or working around power than about confronting it head-on, and I don't believe there can be any major structural change that doesn't actually confront power. Confronting power requires counter-power, and counter-power requires organization. How are you going to take the fight to the multinational corporations, to the militarist hegemonic powers, or to the WTO if you insist on spontaneity at the cost of organization? It is as if we've gotten this idea that, since we disapprove of the Leninist party model of organization, we should do away with organization altogether. That's a complete *non-sequitur*. I'm not invested in defending a particular organizational solution here. But I do want to insist that there's a huge amount of room between vanguardist organization and no organization. Movements that are serious about social transformation need to explore that in-between territory.

Jaeggi: Again, it's not that this concern is absent from these discussions. There has been a lot of work put into the problem of single issues and how social movements can link up or reconnect to address the broader picture. Some of these discussions even go under the label of "addressing the question of organization anew," inventing new forms of organizing that critically reflect upon the failures of the old, avant-garde types of organization and its authoritarianism, while trying to come up with modes of effectively organizing resistance to power.

Fraser: Fair enough. But let's not exaggerate the fruits of these discussions, which, as far as I know, haven't actually generated viable answers. One symptom is the constant appeal to the term "coalition" in contemporary social movement circles. That term is truly ubiquitous. Truth be told, however, it serves more as a placeholder for an organizational strategy than as an actual strategy. Its use is only very rarely coupled with serious reflection on the programmatic basis of a given coalition or the specific forms of coordination its practice requires. What is the relation between a coalition and a political party or a trade union? Can social movements "in coalition" replace or circumvent the need for unions and parties? There's very little real discussion of these issues.

The constant stress on "movements" as opposed to parties or organizations is itself a clue that something has gone wrong on the organizational front. After all, we live in an era where social movements erupt in spectacular ways, occupy public space, capture public attention, and then suddenly disappear without leaving a trace. *Podemos* in Spain is an exception: they've tried to convert the *Indignados* movement into an actual political party. I'm not idealizing them, but that's a very interesting effort. I say this in the context of another symptom: the widespread "NGO-ization" of politics. In recent decades, the NGO has become a substitute for the party or the organization. This is highly problematic for many reasons that have been widely noted, first and foremost by Sonia Alvarez.⁶

Another idea is a "movement of movements." That was the self-understanding of the World Social Forum, which was an impressive effort to create a public space for communication among a vast array of disparate struggles against neoliberalism across the globe. Impressive as it was (or, possibly, still is), the WSF remained deeply divided over what exactly it meant to be a "movement of movements." Should the WSF be an umbrella? Should anyone be able to speak for it? Should it adopt a programmatic vision of "another world?" Should it develop a strategic view about how its constituent movements might coordinate their struggles? Or should one simply sit back and wait for all of that to emerge spontaneously? These are key organizational questions. And I'm sorry to say that the influence of neo-anarchism (including among many who would themselves disclaim that label) has hampered our efforts to answer them.

Jaeggi: We can give these experiments a lot of credit for trying to resolve these organizational problems – after all, these problems can't be solved from the armchair but only in practice, through trial and error – and yet we can still say that some versions of anarchism fall short as a political and theoretical program. As a project for reshaping the basic institutions of society, the anarchist program can still be accused of naïveté for failing to take sufficient account of the coordination needs of modern industrialized society. For example, there is a certain kind of small-scale communalism that has become fashionable again. But if we don't want to turn back from the mode of production and

level of development we have achieved, then this kind of strategy is simply not an option. Also, the idea of affecting change by localized, “pre-figurative” politics ties in with that old-school Marxist critique that anarchist collectivism ultimately becomes a “petit-bourgeois” form of practice, because, however nonhierarchical its internal organization, each collective will still be an enterprise competing with others on the (free) market. In the end, these collectives just end up replacing individuals and firms as the main actors in what is otherwise the same market system – that is, unless some additional overarching structure can be instituted which regulates the relations between actors.

Fraser: I agree. To me, it is inconceivable that we could have a desirable society, whether capitalist or postcapitalist, that does not give a major role to planning. *Contra* orthodox Communism, planning can and should be democratic. It does not require a *nomenklatura* or rule by a class of technical “experts.” But how can we possibly deal with an issue like climate change without some very large-scale planning? A systemic blockage of that scale cannot possibly be left to this little collective or that little collective. *Contra* anarchism, the ecological crisis does not arise from too much organization, but rather from too little. Granted, some issues are best addressed locally, but others require large-scale global planning, and even global governance structures. I don’t know whether Marx and Engels were serious about the state “withering away,” but I don’t see how that’s possible if, by “the state,” we mean democratically accountable institutions that deploy public power to coordinate social interaction in ways that inhibit perverse, unintended effects.

Moreover, having large-scale forms of governance does not mean we can’t also have movements toward more localized forms of production and collective management. I am very strongly in favor of locavorism in terms of food. But I would insist that it’s only by having in place the right kind of large-scale global governance and organization that we can create the conditions under which devolution to the local is possible. National social democracy was possible, after all, only thanks to the Bretton Woods international framework. We would need an analogue of that to make locavorism possible in a way that is coherent, sustainable, democratic, and just. Failing that, there’s no avoiding domination – as, for example, when people with access to good soil have plenty to eat, while those in the desert go without.

De-growth movements

Jaeggi: One thing I took from our previous discussions is the idea that, were we to define the kind of socialism that we would endorse, a very good formula would be: it’s democratic control over the social surplus. This posits a deep internal relation between economy and democracy. It doesn’t simply mean democratic control of the capitalist tiger, or the democratic taming of the tiger; instead, it’s actually “within” the tiger itself. In other words, if we are involved in decisions about what we produce, how we produce, and where we invest the social surplus, then we are no longer just regulating the economy from the outside but transforming the economy from within. This is a radical transformation of what capitalism is, and I’m very happy with this formulation.

I also take it that you would still favor some form of industrial society. The “de-growth” movement has gained quite some momentum, and it could be seen as a model boundary struggle, putting ecological concern, but also personal life, before the imperatives of the market and competition more generally. Not all, but some, of those activists favor some notion of de-industrialization. But you appear to take industrial society as a matter of fact: this is what we have reached, this is what we are confronted with, and there will be no socialism that is not a transformation *within* industrial society. You also mentioned that even local production and distribution can only work if we have some kind of overarching framework. So, I would be interested in what you would grant to at least some kind of de-growth idea, because this is one of the major discussions in the anti-capitalist Left right now.

Fraser: As you know, I spent fall semester of 2016 at the research center on “Post-Growth Societies” in Jena, Germany. As that name suggests, they reject the term “de-growth” in favor of “post-growth.” And that distinction really matters. The first thing I learned when I got there is that “post-growth” does not mean that society should not grow, still less that it has to shrink. The idea is rather that society

should not be built on a hard-wired growth imperative, which operates as a blind necessity or irresistible “force of nature,” pre-empting the possibility for *us* to decide whether or not to grow, how much and how fast to grow – which is, of course, precisely what capitalism does. That’s already an interesting subtlety, and I think it makes good sense.

However, we should also consider what exactly is meant by “growth” in this discourse. What precisely should be growing or not growing? In capitalism, what must necessarily grow is not human wealth or well-being but *capital*. That interpretation of growth (that capital must grow endlessly and without limit) is one that we should forthrightly reject. But it doesn’t necessarily follow that we should be producing less, especially in light of the huge levels of deprivation and poverty in the world. The real question is not *how much* is being produced but *what* is being produced, and how and to whose benefit. These so-to-speak qualitative questions are the heart of the matter. We cannot confine ourselves to questions framed in exclusively quantitative terms, such as “growing” versus “not growing.”

We also need to unpack what we mean by “industrial society.” I’m happy that some things I use are produced industrially; other things, not so much. For example, I’m glad airplanes are industrially produced. I wouldn’t want to board one that somebody just built out of their garage; I’m glad there are standards, regulations, controls, and inspections aimed at ensuring their durability and safety. Food, however, is another matter. I’d be glad to see the end of industrial farming of animals and of mass production of genetically engineered crops. Once again, we should focus on the qualitative question: *Which* goods are we talking about? How is their production organized, and by whom? Is someone profiting from it at the expense of others? Is the work safe and rewarding, or is it demeaning and deadening? Is it democratically organized? Is surplus being extracted from it for the benefit of corporate shareholders? Does it rest on a hidden abode of unwaged and expropriated labor? Is its energetic basis ecologically sustainable?

What I’m getting at is that the phrase “industrial society” doesn’t adequately capture what’s important. Nor does the category of “growth.” In my view, you can’t be “for” or “against” these things. You need to use other terms to get to the real questions.

Postcolonial, decolonial, and indigenous movements

Jaeggi: To continue with social movements and struggles – for quite some time now, there have been profound critiques of Western modernity within the Left. On the level of theory, this has come by way of postcolonialism. But there are also indigenous movements that many on the Left sympathize with, and these may not fit easily into your idea of socialism as democratic control of the social surplus. They might not want the kind of industrialized society and state institutions you support, even if they are qualified by “de-” or “post-growth” ideas. The Left has had to undergo an important learning process as it comes to terms with the notion that it’s not as easy as Marx thought, and all these “pre-modern” kinds of upheavals and movements are responding to a certain kind of discontent that might not just wither away once we’ve defined the problem in socialist terms and forwarded a socialist solution. Granted, we haven’t achieved socialism yet, so we don’t know how these concerns would be addressed and would be solved in different ways. Yet it could still be the case that our ideas about socialism rest on a sectarian conception of modernity, which is biased against legitimate and desirable views of a good life.

On the other hand, I don’t mean to endorse those exaggerated critiques that insist that all received ideas about equality, non-domination, democracy, or freedom are still in the grip of the “imperialist” tendency to homogenize forms of life that are radically different, and these forms of life must be allowed to rely on their own kinds of knowledge, drawn from their own traditions, practices, and cultural forms. I would, of course, grant that we cannot and should not pretend to be “in the same boat” with those whose perspectives and experiences have been neglected through the legacy of colonialism and imperialism. But an adequate solution cannot be one that effectively replaces the asymmetry produced by colonialist ideology with another asymmetry brought on by the restriction of

analysis and judgment for the sake of avoiding ethnocentrism. Here I strongly sympathize with Uma Narayan's observation that "refusing to judge" is no solution, as it can all too easily turn into yet another "'Western' gesture that confirms the moral inequality of Third World cultures by shielding them from moral and political evaluations that 'Western' contexts and practices are subject to."⁷ If that's right, as I believe it is, then the real task is to foster transcultural critique and dialogue, which doesn't refrain from judging forms of life but is very cautious to do this on an equal footing.

What is your position here? I ask not only because these movements have an important presence worldwide, but also because there is a substantial portion of the contemporary Left that reflects upon and even leans toward this kind of critique.

Fraser: I agree entirely with your view of these matters, including the last point about the need for real debate on an equal footing – although that is easier said than done. But let me make two further points. The first has to do with the relation between capitalism and cultural pluralism; the second, with asymmetrical power. I credit the first point to Hartmut Rosa, who argued in a brilliant early paper that capitalism itself is a major obstacle to cultural pluralism.⁸ Despite its self-proclaimed dedication to "choice," capitalism's logic is to flatten differences by "culturalizing" them, treating them as consumer or lifestyle options arrayed before us in a tantalizing way, while concealing the fact that all are sitting on a shared platform built around the imperative of maximal accumulation of capital. And that changes the character of the "choices." The constraints of that system are so strong and pervasive that the chance to pursue qualitatively different forms of life is severely restricted. The conclusion I draw is that, while socialism may not be a sufficient condition for a genuine (and desirable) form of cultural pluralism, it is very definitely a necessary condition.

The second point, about asymmetrical power, follows from the same premise about the power of the capitalist world system. It is very unhelpful, in my view, to presume a sharp dichotomous line between "modern Western" civilization and "pre-modern non-Western" societies, as if "Western civilization" were unitary and had emerged autonomously from the head of Zeus, untouched by interaction with "non-Europeans"; and as if the latter's societies were themselves pristine, not already entangled with global forces, in ways both relatively benign and downright lethal. So, if the issue is where we stand now, we need to situate it in relation to the history of capitalism. Capitalism didn't create transregional interaction, of course, but it certainly accelerated and deepened it, and, even more important, it gave it a distinctive shape – both by creating the geography of core and periphery and by establishing the mutually imbricated dynamics of "development" and "under-development." (I am thinking of Walter Rodney's cogent formulation, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*.⁹) Here, too, in other words, the imperialist-capitalist world system forms the inescapable frame of reference because (among other things) it generates both "cross-civilizational" fertilization and stark asymmetries of power, which must be thought together.

I understand that some thinkers and activists reject the perspective I'm sketching as itself imperialist. But I'm convinced that that is mistaken. Far from being an external Western imposition, it has been pioneered by thinkers and activists from the Global South – above all, by those who have engaged deeply with supposedly "Eurocentric" frameworks such as Marxism. From what I can see, many of the most interesting recent efforts along these lines are coming out of Latin America – probably because of the strength and sophistication there of both Marxism and indigenous movements. When democratizing, anti-neoliberal movements are informed simultaneously by both those perspectives, sparks fly. In the Andean countries, for example, those movements united urban European-descended populations with indigenous populations behind the Quechua expression "*sumak kawsay*" (usually translated as "*buen vivir*" in Spanish), which suggests non-exploitative relations with nature and among human beings – hence, a "good life" not structured by capitalism's constitutive divisions. And they used this catchphrase in an interesting way: not to demand preservation of traditional life forms, but rather to transform present-day capitalist society for everyone's benefit. They used it to promote a form of life that is "modern" in the sense of being gender-egalitarian and democratic, but also ecologically sustainable, "plurinational," and freed from the treadmill of "growth." Another example is the transnational uprising of the Sioux, who joined with other First Nations peoples and

Euro-American radicals in the US and Canada to oppose the Dakota Access Pipeline and other neoliberal extractive projects. In cases like these, indigenous movements are working closely with “Western” ecologists and segments of the “Euro-American” Left. Developments like these go well beyond old categories of “Western” versus “non-Western.”

Jaeggi: I would say some of these movements are much more sophisticated than some of the left-wing theorists who tend to romanticize indigenous knowledge.

Fraser: Yes, that’s exactly my point. But we shouldn’t forget that there are also very sophisticated left-wing forms of postcolonial theory. The Subaltern Studies School was exemplary, at least in its early days, in its re-appropriation of Gramsci, and its effort to theorize the relation between class and caste. There is, in addition, the impressive body of South African neo-Marxist theory on “racial capitalism.” And there are towering works that are harder to classify, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* and Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*.¹⁰ All of those thinkers have staged deep encounters between elements of the Western Marxist tradition and contexts where capitalist development was more expropriative than exploitative, premised as much on status oppression as on class domination in the narrow sense. One doesn’t need to agree with every word to recognize the profundity and importance of such works. I intend my own expanded account of capitalism, which encompasses expropriation as well as exploitation, as a contribution to this strand of critical theorizing.

I’m less enthralled, I must confess, with the current of postcolonial thought that is centered on “de-coloniality.” At least some proponents of this approach seem to imagine that it is possible (and desirable!) to “purify” indigenous culture, to purge the “Western” influences that have “contaminated” it, and thereby to return to something “pristine.” And that seems unhelpful to me.

Jaeggi: But how would you characterize these kinds of movements within the expanded conception of capitalism? One could tell a story of Western modernity, which prioritized colonialism and imperialism, but which saw them much more as enterprises of political expansionism and outright domination than, say, driven by the logic of capital. Where do anti-imperialist and indigenous struggles feature on your map of boundary struggles?

Fraser: Here I would recall our discussion of racial and imperial oppression in [chapters 1](#) and [2](#). There, I analyzed those phenomena as stemming from the joint, overdetermined logic of “the economic” and “the political.” Utilizing that double lens, I interpreted expropriation as simultaneously a mechanism of accumulation and an apparatus of domination, premised on politically enforced hierarchies of status. The thrust was to refute the idea that we must choose between economic and political accounts of capitalist imperialism. It is not an either/or but a both/and. On this point, I’m in agreement with many theorists of imperialism and the capitalist world system, including Arendt, Harvey, Arrighi, and Wallerstein.

But it is not just theorists who appreciate this point. Many anti-imperialist struggles have incorporated a double focus, targeting both the economic and political aspects. And many other movements, whose ostensible focus is elsewhere, have an anti-imperialist dimension that encompasses both of those poles. All these activists know very well that capitalism has never lived from exploitation alone, that the exploitation of workers in industrial production in the countries of the core always rested on massive expropriation of cheap energy (including human muscle power), land, raw materials, and other inputs from the periphery. They appreciate too that this remains the case today. Even though the new geography of financialized capitalism has scrambled these distinctions to a considerable degree, illegitimate transfers of value continue in many forms old and new, imperial and neo-imperial – just recall my discussions of environmental load displacement and care deficit displacement in [chapter 2](#). For me, this context is crucial for understanding the stakes of indigenous and postcolonial struggles and for assessing their emancipatory potential. Whatever solutions they (or we!) propose can only be evaluated with this global history in mind.

The triple movement

Jaeggi: Later, I want to talk about *regressive* responses to capitalism. To prepare the way, let's concentrate first on the conceptual level. You've been drawing heavily on Polanyi's idea of a "double movement" between marketization and social protection, along with his thesis that capitalist society can be characterized as an ongoing conflict between these two poles. But you suggested that we revise his idea and think in terms of a "triple movement," which would add an axis of emancipation to Polanyi's original two. I take it that, in order to avoid regressive answers to the disintegrative effects of marketization, we need to include the emancipation pole. How does this triple movement between marketization, protection, and emancipation figure into the question of social struggles as boundary struggles?

Fraser: I didn't realize this until fairly late, but I now see that my concept of boundary struggle owes a lot to Polanyi. He doesn't use that term, of course, but his "double movement" really fits the bill: it's a struggle over the boundary between "economy" and "society." While some social actors seek to extend market logic deep into society, others aim to hold the line. In effect, the struggle is about where economization should stop: one side thinks there are virtually no limits, while the other wants to wall off communities, relations, and habitats whose integrity is threatened by market incursions. In Polanyi's view, the marketizers were the revolutionaries while the protectionists were the conservatives. And yet his sympathies lay squarely with the latter.

But, as I've said before, Polanyi's model is premised on a simplification of capitalism's institutional structure and of the conflicts that structure generates. He allows only for two possibilities: either one is for economy and marketization, or one is for society and social protection. He narrates a substantial chunk of the history of capitalism, from the early nineteenth to the mid twentieth century, in terms of this one fault line, tracing the conflict between free-marketeers and social protectionists. As he tells it, the whole of this epoch centers on that conflict, which progressively sharpens until everything goes up in flames with the rise of fascism and the outbreak of World War II.

This is problematic in several respects. On the social-action level, Polanyi overlooks a number of epochal struggles that raged throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: struggles for the abolition of slavery, the emancipation of women, and the overthrow of colonialism and imperialism. These struggles do not fit either pole of the double movement: they sought neither to defend society nor to extend the market. Most aimed rather to overcome entrenched systems of domination, whose grounds did not lie exclusively in one or the other of Polanyi's two domains but rather in the overall institutional configuration of capitalist society, especially in its constitutive divisions of production from reproduction, economy from polity, exploitation from expropriation, core from periphery, and human society from non-human nature. So I think we should understand them as instantiating a third, analytically distinct pole of social movement, which I have called "emancipation." The upshot is that, where Polanyi saw a double movement, I think the reality was (and still is!) a triple movement, in which movements for social protection collide not only with projects of marketization but also with struggles for emancipation.

Jaeggi: Okay, I see the problem on the social-action level. But I gather you think Polanyi's approach also has weaknesses on the socialstructural level.

Fraser: Yes, I do. The problem is that his category "society" is really a catch-all, an ill-defined blanket term for everything other than the market economy. As a result, his picture of capitalism's institutional structure is over-simplified. By positing a stark dualism of economy and society, which implies a single boundary, he misses capitalism's triad of constitutive institutional separations (economy/polity, production/reproduction, and human society / non-human nature) and overlooks the complex of boundaries associated with those separations. Certainly, Polanyi was interested in what we would call ecology, social reproduction, and democratic politics. But his conceptual framework clarifies neither their place in capitalist society nor the crisis tendencies associated with them. So, I suggest we replace his dualistic, economy/society view with the expanded conception of capitalism

outlined here. In that case, we'd end up with three analytically distinct loci of boundary struggle, each of which attracts contestation in the form of a triple movement.

Jaeggi: Some might say that, by enriching Polanyi in this way, you also take away some of his radicalism. In a certain way, “emancipation” has a place in his picture, as one of the two world-historical resolutions of the struggle he had in view: he speaks of socialism and contrasts it with fascism. Could you say a bit more about how inserting emancipation as a strand into the movement gives a less Manichean picture with multiple tensions and effects of synergy?

Fraser: It's true that Polanyi was very invested in promoting an emancipatory resolution of the crisis he wrote about. But I don't think that his conceptual framework was up to that task. The whole thrust of his analysis, however unintentional, was to counterpose a warm, integrated “society” to a bad, disintegrative “economy.” By contrast, he offered no resources for distinguishing socially integrated forms of life that are premised on domination from those that are not. And that left his evident preference for socialism as just that: an ungrounded subjective preference. So I would dispute the claim that, by explicitly introducing the category of emancipation, I am taking away his radicalism. I would say, rather, that I am strengthening it, by supplying the concepts needed to ground it.

But that is not all. By introducing a third, emancipatory pole of social struggle, I am also clarifying how radicalism might emerge in capitalist society. I've used the triple movement to parse conflict scenarios in terms of “two against one.” For example, I take social-democratic state-managed capitalism to have devised a new way of synthesizing the two poles that Polanyi understood as mutually incompatible – namely, marketization and social protection. But, as I explained in [chapter 2](#), this synthesis was based on the sacrifice of emancipation; it was built on women's dependency through the family wage, on racial/ethnic exclusions, and on ongoing imperial expropriation. So, it was an alliance of two against one: marketization and social protection against emancipation. In due course, as we saw, that arrangement broke down, and it was replaced by a different two-against-one scenario, which is distinctive of financialized capitalism: in this new scenario, marketization has teamed up with emancipation at the expense of social protection. That sounds perverse, of course, but it really does capture a situation in which mainstream liberal currents of emancipatory social movements have adopted thin, meritocratic, market-friendly understandings of equality and freedom that dovetail perfectly with the projects and legitimation requirements of leading sectors of “cognitive capitalism.” It is the dominance of these sectors, including IT, Hollywood, and Wall Street, that has pulverized industry and metastasized debt, promoted austerity and cannibalized working-class living standards throughout the historic core of the capitalist world system. And all this has proceeded under the cover of progressive tropes: “multicultural diversity,” “women's empowerment,” LGBTQ rights.

The neoliberal project is faltering today, for reasons both structural and political. Its hegemonic alliance of emancipation and marketization/financialization has lost much of its charismatic luster. This is therefore a very good moment to envision another scenario of two-against-one, the only one that has not yet been tried: social protection and emancipation against runaway marketization and financialization. That is certainly my preferred scenario for the present conjuncture. And it grew out of my critical engagement with Karl Polanyi, as filtered through and leavened by my much longer engagement with “the other Karl.”¹¹

The rise and fall of progressive neoliberalism

Jaeggi: We already mentioned the possibility that social movements can be driven by the symptoms of deep-seated contradictions and crises of capitalism, but nevertheless address these questions in a way that one might count as non-emancipatory or even regressive. These movements are part of a dynamic of social struggle that calls capitalism into question, yet not only are some of these movements not emancipatory, many are quite radically *anti*-emancipatory, even fascist or fundamentalist. How do we assess this situation? Despite the attention given in 2011 to Occupy Wall Street, one could argue that, on a worldwide scale, the majority of anti-capitalist sentiment and mobilization is not leftist. This confronts us with a serious problem.

We've always had conservative critiques of capitalism: some of these express a certain nostalgia for precapitalist forms of life; others are fine with capitalist economy but object to certain forms of social modernity that accompany it. Conservative newspapers can even be more forceful and radical than some leftists in their attacks – for example, with regard to the neoliberalization of universities, since conservatives often have attachments to certain old humanist values.

Yet there are some strands committed to calling the capitalist status quo into question in a very dangerous way, and we need to ask how seriously we should take them. This is one reason why it's important, from the very beginning, to have analytic as well as normative criteria. We can't just think in terms of a simple binary that sorts the forces of capitalism onto one side and the forces against capitalism onto the other side. That's too simplistic. I know that you aim at avoiding this binary in the way you draw out all the ambivalences of the triple movement, but perhaps the grid of affirmative versus transformative struggles needs to be expanded by taking stock of its sinister flipside. This might reach from affirmation of exactly the wrong aspects of boundaries to deeply regressive inclinations to abolishing them altogether.

One such type of regressive social movement would be fundamentalism, of which there are many varieties, including different strands of Islamic fundamentalism, Christian fundamentalism, or even aspects of Modi's attempts in India to codify a fundamentalist version of Hinduism, which runs entirely contrary to the received development of that religious tradition. Another would be the forms of right-wing populism that have recently been emerging or gathering strength. We've encountered them in Donald Trump's supporters, in pro-Brexit voters, and there are a variety of other movements we've seen gain momentum across Europe, in France, the Netherlands, Denmark, and elsewhere.

Fraser: These are important and pressing questions. We certainly *do* need to understand the surge in regressive right-wing responses to the present crisis and the relative weakness of left-wing emancipatory alternatives. But let's recall what I said before: my conceptual distinction between affirmative and transformative struggles does not equate to the normative distinction between emancipatory and regressive struggles. We already agreed about that and about the need for (nonfreestanding, non-external) normative standards.

If we keep that understanding in mind, we can situate both sorts of responses, the regressive as well as the emancipatory, in relation to the current context. Both oppose the boundary configurations instituted by financialized capitalism. Both reject the neoliberal commonsense that has supported that configuration: the elite consensus in favor of "free trade" (really, the free movement of capital) and corporate globalization. Both have deserted the established political parties, which upheld both neoliberal policy and neoliberal hegemony. Both left- and right-wing radical movements are actively searching for new ideologies, projects, and leadership. The result is a widespread unraveling of neoliberal hegemony.

That unraveling provides the inescapable context for addressing your question about the comparative strength of right-wing responses. The necessary first step, in my view, is temporarily to bracket normative considerations, and try to think together such otherwise heterogeneous developments as the Brexit vote, the election of Trump, the surprising strength of Bernie Sanders's challenge to Hillary Clinton in the US Democratic primary, the rising fortunes of ethnonationalist and economic-nationalist parties throughout Europe, and the broad support for Jeremy Corbyn's course change in the British Labour Party. Obviously, these responses differ importantly from one another, including on the normative level. But all of them are effectively saying that neoliberalism isn't working, that there's something deeply wrong with the present way of organizing life and doing business, and that we need to replace it with something dramatically different. And that's an indication that, contrary to what I wrote a few years ago,¹² a real legitimation crisis may be brewing. The sense is widespread now that the political classes and established parties are bankrupt, that they've been captured by private interests and should be booted out. Granted, there is massive disagreement as to who and what should replace them and as to where the blame ultimately lies: Finance? Immigrants? Muslims? The 1%? But anti-neoliberal forces are everywhere on the march, openly rejecting the neoliberal project and severely weakening, if not utterly shattering, its hegemony. What emerges in situations like this is not

always pretty. I am reminded of Gramsci's description of an earlier "crisis of authority": "the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."¹³ What we're seeing now are the morbid symptoms.

That's the context, in my view, for addressing your question, which I would reformulate as follows: in the void opened up by the unraveling of neoliberal hegemony, why do transformative movements on the Right appear to fare better than those on the Left?

Jaeggi: I'm a little more skeptical about whether these movements are really all somehow united in the claim that neoliberalism is at its end or should be put to its end. In Germany (as well as elsewhere) we have new ethnonationalistic or "völkisch" radical right-wing populist movements. Practically all of them are racist; practically all of them unite under some kind of anti-political correctness and anti-immigration *ressentiment*, usually accompanied by Islamophobia; some are even openly revanchist with respect to Nazi Germany. But only a minority of them is on the protectionist side of the triple movement and against marketization. On economic grounds, a great number of them are clearly defending neoliberal positions – provided, of course, that "we" get rid of the immigrants and refugees, "reclaim our country," and become "German again" (or, as the case may be, French, Polish, Hungarian, Danish, and so forth). There are a lot of inconsistencies in the various claims and programs, in Europe and worldwide. But I don't see a strict anti-neoliberal tendency at work, neither in programs nor in deeds. The strange, alarming, and disturbing thing – a tendency we still do not understand – is rather the odd alliance between economic and political neoliberalism and protectionist, nationalist, anti-modern elements. How could Trump, with his strong alliances with (not only) Wall Street and his desire to abolish what few welfare state protections there were in the US to start with, represent "the end of neoliberalism?" Isn't he rather its continuation?

Fraser: I still want to address your previous question: Why is the Right faring better than the Left in the current conjuncture? But let me try first to answer your objections to my underlying premise that there is a crisis of neoliberal hegemony. You say, first, that support for right-wing European parties is based more on racism than on opposition to neoliberalism; and, second, that Donald Trump is still governing as a neoliberal. Both points turn in part on interpretations of empirical matters. But both could also invite a conceptual confusion by leading us to conflate some important distinctions: first, the distinction between neoliberal policy and neoliberal commonsense; and, second, the distinction between right-wing populist sentiment and the policies pursued in office by those elected on the basis of such sentiment. Let me explain.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that you are right about Germany: that the rise of the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) has nothing to do with economic insecurity, but is strictly a matter of racism pure and simple. I'm not sure if that is really the case; I suspect that that party, like virtually all others, appeals to a heterogeneous population, whose various segments support it for different reasons. But, if you are right, that would make Germany an outlier, an exception in the current conjuncture. Elsewhere in Europe, the collapse or weakening of social-democratic and traditional center-right parties has at least as much to do with their joint promotion of "austerity," precarity, and high unemployment as with principled, hard-core racism. This is clear in France, where both the Socialist and center-right parties have bled support to the Right and the Left after trying for decades to curtail labor protections and social entitlements – a job that will now fall to a banker and political outsider who will govern without a political party. It is true, as well, in the UK, where popular rebellion against the ravages of financialization, promoted by both "New Labour" and the Conservatives, finally found a voice in the Brexit campaign, especially in the deindustrialized North. The proof, in both cases, is the striking volatility of majority-nationality working-class voters. They shifted back and forth between Mélenchon and Le Pen in France and from Brexit to Corbyn in the UK. What this shows is that, far from displaying any principled attachment to racism, the voters in question have acted opportunistically, seeking the most effective vehicle for registering protest in the context at hand.

As far as I can determine, this is the case as well in Italy, Greece, Spain, Sweden, and Denmark, where ethnonationalist movements have thrived in the wake of social insecurity following neoliberalization – forced on them in some cases by Germany, it must be said; and where left-wing vehicles for

expressing protest have been weak or compromised. That these movements focus their ire on immigrants does not prove that the overwhelming majority of their supporters are incorrigible racists, although some of them undoubtedly are. Before casting all of them into the same basket of “deplorables,” as Hillary Clinton notoriously did, I would want to consider what else they may want to express and what other political vehicles are available to them for expressing it. Could it be that fear of immigrants expresses the not-so-far-fetched anxiety that things are out of control?

It’s another matter, in any case, what such right-wing populist movements will do if and when they come to power. If the past is any guide, the politicians they elect will make deals with global finance to continue neoliberal policy in some other guise. But that does not refute the claim that the sentiments fueling their rise are anti-neoliberal. It simply underlines the point that a collapse of neoliberal hegemony does not by itself entail the end of neoliberal policy.

The poster child for this point is the United States, the only country in the Global North outside of east-central Europe where an anti-neoliberal ethnonational movement has come to power – or, rather, seemed to. You are right, of course, that, since assuming the presidency, Donald Trump has failed to pursue the economic populist policies on which he campaigned. Far from it! Having temporized on NAFTA, he has neither lifted a finger to rein in Wall Street nor taken a single serious step to implement large-scale, job-creating public infrastructure projects or otherwise encourage manufacturing. And, far from proposing a tax code reform whose principal beneficiaries would be working-class and middle-class families, he has signed on to the boilerplate Republican version, designed to funnel more wealth to the 1% (including to himself and his family). But none of this refutes the claim that he won the presidency by campaigning as a *reactionary populist*. On the contrary, this is a classic case of bait and switch. Having surreptitiously replaced economic nationalism with neoliberalism upon assuming office, Trump has doubled down on the recognition front, issuing a slew of ever more vicious and exclusionary provocations. The result is that voters who thought they were electing a reactionary populist have in fact gotten something else, namely a *hyper-reactionary neoliberal*.¹⁴ (I could go into more detail about that later, if you wish.)

Here, I want only to insist on a simple point: the fact that workers who vote for right-wing populists get betrayed by those whom they elect does not refute the idea that they are looking for social protection. Of course, many of them misconceive what it is that they need protection from – putting the onus on immigrants instead of on finance; and their understanding of what exactly it will take to protect them is often faulty. But, in voting for Trump, an important segment of working- and middle-class Americans wanted (among other things) the abrogation of “free-trade” agreements, and large-scale public infrastructure projects to create well-paid manufacturing and construction jobs. More than eight million of them, including those who delivered the Electoral College to Trump, had voted for Obama in 2012 (when he campaigned from the Left, borrowing Occupy rhetoric), and many of those had voted for Sanders in the Democratic primaries of 2016. In all three cases, these voters responded consistently to class-based distributive appeals, whereas the recognition dynamics they signed on to along the way varied widely. Thus, they too exhibited a volatility that belies the idea that they are nothing but card-carrying racists.

Jaeggi: I agree with you that these movements are a symptom of a crisis and that the usual liberal response of moral condemnation is wholly inadequate. It is not enough to say that they are morally wrong or outrageous, or that they represent an unexpected and contingent falling back from “progressive” achievements. This much is true. So, whether or not it is rightly viewed as a rejection of neoliberalism, the current wave of right-wing populism might still be understood as a symptom of some underlying crisis, problem, or contradiction within the recent development of neoliberalism, even if these movements are reacting and giving expression to it in a way that is fatally flawed.

But then the question is why this reaction took the regressive, reactionary form that it did, as opposed to a more emancipatory one. This can’t be explained by an egocentric pursuit of self-interest: just think of the fact that (in your country) those who are most dependent on a functioning system of health insurance and social welfare choose politicians who are openly trying to destroy it! Some kind of ideology-theoretical approach seems to be called for here. How does it come about that the social

suffering and indignation brought on by the present crisis did not generate emancipatory movements but instead gave rise to reactionary, authoritarian, and even proto-fascist impulses? What are the mechanisms at work here? We should not insinuate that those voting for right-wing authoritarian populism do this without any “reason” (or, let’s say, “occasion”), but nor should we take their motives at face value. This further raises the question of what a left-wing answer would be, and why the Left has not been able to address these issues or offer a viable alternative.

Fraser: I agree that the dismissive response is wrong – and, I would add, *counterproductive*.

Right-wing populists *do* have genuine grievances, which deserve to be validated. And reactionary populist movements *are* responding to a real underlying crisis, which also requires acknowledgment. The problem, as you suggest, lies in the way the grievances are expressed, the movements’ mistaken diagnosis of the root causes, their resort to scapegoating and pseudo-solutions.

Why, you ask, have such positions become so attractive to so many in the present context? Well, there is a lot to be said on that subject, but one key factor is the worldwide decline of the Left in the course of the last several decades. Newly radicalized and politicized actors simply do not have much access to secular, left-wing worldviews that could offer anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist interpretations of the present crisis. And in the absence of left-wing alternatives, the Right becomes the go-to option for those who want radical change.

But that is not the whole story. There’s also a darker aspect, which we should have the courage to explore. I mean neoliberalism’s hegemonization – or “recuperation,” to use Boltanski and Chiapello’s term – of major currents of what was once the Left.¹⁵ To say this is to invoke a cousin of what you called an “ideology-theoretical approach,” but it is a version that owes more to Gramsci than to Althusser or the Frankfurt School and that invites analysis in terms of the triple movement.

Jaeggi: It’s not only about the Left leaving a vacuum open for the Right by failing to develop a good strategy. In your view, somehow the Left has become hampered in its ability to address these issues, right?

Fraser: Yes, that’s right. It has to do with the “two-against-one” scenario I sketched before. As I said, social democracy was based on a two-against-one alliance of marketization and social protection against emancipation, while financialized capitalism has generated an alliance of marketization and emancipation against social protection. And that second alliance has divided the social forces that a serious Left must unite. It has cut the proponents of emancipation off from the manufacturing-sector workers and rural communities who are reeling from financialization and gravitating to right-wing populism. Actually, it’s worse than that. More than just cutting them off, the new alliance has set dominant currents of emancipatory movements in direct opposition to people who could (and should!) be among their most important allies in crafting a left-wing response to the current crisis.

Let me explain how this came about. In the decades since the 1970s, two different sets of struggles unfolded at about the same time in many countries of the capitalist core. The first set pitted labor against capital, which sought to break unions, drive down real wages, relocate manufacturing to low-wage regions in the semi-periphery, and precaritize work. This was an old-fashioned class struggle, which has mainly been won by capital, at least for now. But unfolding in parallel to it was a second front, which pitted the forces of emancipation (in the form of “new social movements,” such as feminism, multiculturalism, anti-racism, LGBTQ rights, etc.) against defenders of “old-fashioned” family values and lifeworlds, many of whom were also on the losing end of the first struggle and resented the cultural “cosmopolitanism” associated with the new globalizing economy. Caught up in the second struggle, and largely oblivious to the first, hegemonic currents of the progressive movements dropped the ball on political economy, ignoring the structural transformations underway. Worse still, they drifted to meritocratic and individualist ways of framing their agendas – think, for example, of “lean-in” feminisms dedicated to “cracking the glass ceiling” so as to enable “talented” women to climb the higher rungs of the corporate ladder. Such currents abandoned efforts to

understand gender domination structurally, as grounded in the capitalist separation of production from reproduction. And they abandoned less privileged women, who lacked the cultural and social capital to benefit from lean-in and who therefore remained stuck in the basement.

What I have called “progressive neoliberalism” emerged from the collision of those two sets of struggles.¹⁶ Surprising as the term may sound, it aptly names the hegemonic bloc that dominated US politics throughout the period from Clinton through Obama. And there are variants elsewhere as well. In each case, hegemonic currents of emancipatory movements (such as feminism, anti-racism, multiculturalism, and LGBTQ rights) became allied – in some cases consciously and deliberately, in other cases not – with neoliberal forces aiming to financialize the capitalist economy, especially the most dynamic, forward-looking, and globalized sectors of capital (such as Hollywood, IT, and finance). As usual, capital got the better of the deal. In this case the “cognitive capitalist” sectors used ideals like diversity and empowerment, which could in principle serve different ends, to prettify policies that devastated manufacturing and what were once middle-class lives. In other words, they used the charisma of their progressive allies to spread a veneer of emancipation over their own regressive project of massive upward redistribution.

Jaeggi: I was always convinced that you addressed this question of what Hester Eisenstein called *liaisons dangereuses* with real insight.¹⁷ (In fact, you’ve always been at your best as a critical theorist seeking to clarify “the struggles and wishes of the age.”) Nevertheless, there were a lot of people who reacted to your accusations – namely, that parts of the feminist movement have bought into progressive neoliberalism – by saying you’re only giving half the story, that there have always been strands of feminism that reject this connection. Queer theory, for instance, cultivates a strong critique of established power structures and seems very intent on criticizing its own entanglements with hegemonic projects, as in the critique of “pink-washing,” “homo-nationalism,” and so on.

Fraser: Certainly, not all feminists were won over to the neoliberal cause. But those who were, whether knowingly or otherwise, constituted the largest, most visible segment of the movement, while those (like me!) who resisted were confined to the margins. Certainly, too, progressives in the neoliberal bloc were its junior partners, far less powerful than their allies from Wall Street, Hollywood, and Silicon Valley. Yet they contributed something essential: charisma, a “new spirit of capitalism.” Exuding an aura of emancipation, this new “spirit” charged neoliberal economic activity with a frisson of excitement. Now associated with the forward-thinking and the liberatory, the cosmopolitan and the morally advanced, the dismal suddenly became thrilling. Thanks in large part to this ethos, policies that fostered a vast upward redistribution of wealth and income acquired the patina of legitimacy.

In any case, the reaction of those feminists you describe was defensive. What they understood as an “accusation” was actually an attempt to understand the construction of *hegemony* – the process by which the patently regressive class project of neoliberalism gained a measure of “consent” by reinflecting and drawing in important currents of progressive movements. Need I add that it is essential to understand how hegemony works if we want to figure out how to build a counter-hegemony?

Jaeggi: Even if some of these “liaisons” are non-intentional or even at odds with what these movements were aiming for, they remain unintended consequences of social transformations taking place on a deeper level. Putting this in the framework of the triple movement gives it a lot more analytical depth than, say, Nina Power’s sardonic remark that “capitalism is a girl’s best friend.”¹⁸ But don’t you agree that, while “Third Way” progressives like Clinton, Blair, and Schröder did their part to solidify the neoliberal project, it was figures like Reagan and Thatcher who set the whole thing in motion?

Fraser: Yes, that’s right. Progressive neoliberals did not dream up neoliberal political economy. That honor belongs to the Right: to its intellectual luminaries Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and James Buchanan; to its visionary politicians, Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan; and to their deep-pocketed enablers, Charles and David Koch, among others. But the right-wing “fundamentalist”

version of neoliberalism could not become hegemonic in countries whose commonsense was still shaped by social-democratic or New Deal thinking, the “rights revolution,” and a slew of social movements descended from the New Left. For the neoliberal project to triumph, it had to be repackaged, given a broader appeal, linked to other, non-economic aspirations for emancipation. Only when decked out as *progressive* could a deeply *regressive* political economy become the dynamic center of a new hegemonic bloc.

I would stress three further points. First, neoliberalism is not just an economic policy; it is also a *political project* that strives to achieve hegemony by assembling a historic bloc. The favored strategy is to link its plutocratic, expropriative politics of distribution to a politics of recognition that can win broad support. Consequently, and this is my second point, neoliberalism is not monolithic; rather, there are progressive and regressive strands of it. The difference turns on recognition. Whereas both variants promote a distributive politics that chiefly benefits the 1%, one of them articulates that program with an apparently inclusive politics of recognition, while the other conjoins it instead to an explicitly exclusionary alternative. Finally, it was especially the *progressive* strand of neoliberalism that succeeded in becoming hegemonic, defeating not only anti-neoliberal forces, but also *reactionary* neoliberal forces. The winning strategy linked a deeply inegalitarian, anti-labor politics of distribution to a modern, “forward-looking,” and apparently emancipatory politics of recognition.

That was certainly the case in the United States. There, progressive neoliberalism achieved hegemony in the 1990s, when Bill Clinton assumed the presidency. Parallel formations emerged elsewhere around that time, in Latin America, Europe, and in the UK; the paradigm case was Tony Blair’s “New Labour,” but there was also Gerhard Schröder in Germany. In the US, the Clintonite wing of the Democratic Party quietly disarticulated the old New Deal coalition that had united organized labor, immigrants, African-Americans, the urban middle classes, and some fractions of big industrial capital for several decades. In its place, they forged a new alliance of entrepreneurs, bankers, suburbanites, “symbolic workers,” new social movements, Latinos, and youth, while retaining the support of African-Americans, who felt they had nowhere else to go. Bill Clinton won the presidency by talking the talk of diversity, multiculturalism, and women’s rights. Once in office, however, he walked the walk of Goldman Sachs, deregulating the banking system and negotiating the free-trade agreements that accelerated deindustrialization.

The combination of progressive recognition and regressive distribution was sufficiently powerful at least for a while to defeat the Right (the Republicans in the US, the Conservatives in the UK), whose counter-project combined regressive distribution with reactionary (ethnonationalist, anti-immigrant, pro-Christian) recognition. But the progressive neoliberal victory came at a price. What was thrown under the bus were the declining industrial centers, especially the so-called “Rust Belt,” once the stronghold of New Deal social democracy, but now the region that delivered the Electoral College to Donald Trump in 2016. That region, along with newer industrial centers in the South, took a major hit as financial deregulation and free-trade policies destroyed manufacturing centers over the last two decades.

Even as those communities were being devastated, the progressive-neoliberal bloc was diffusing a recognition ethos that was superficially egalitarian and emancipatory – centered on ideals of “diversity,” women’s “empowerment,” LGBTQ rights, post-racialism, multiculturalism, and environmentalism. However, those ideals were interpreted in a specific, limited way that was fully compatible with the Goldman Sachsification of the US economy. Protecting the environment meant carbon trading. Promoting home ownership meant subprime loans bundled together and resold as mortgage-backed securities. Equality meant meritocracy. The reduction of equality to meritocracy was especially fateful. The progressive-neoliberal aim was not to abolish social hierarchy but to “diversify” it, “empowering” “talented” women, people of color, and sexual minorities to rise to the top. And that ideal was inherently *class-specific*: geared to ensuring that “deserving” individuals from “underrepresented groups” could attain positions and pay on a par with the straight White men of *their*

own class. The feminist variant is telling but not unique. Focused on “leaning in” and “cracking the glass ceiling,” its principal beneficiaries could only be those already in possession of the requisite social, cultural, and economic capital.

Progressive neoliberalism was perfectly incarnated by Hillary Clinton in 2016, and it became the principal target of Trump’s campaign. The whole election was, in fact, a referendum on progressive neoliberalism. If we want to understand Trump’s victory, that of the Brexit campaign, and the strong showing of right-wing populist parties elsewhere we need to understand what those who voted for them were so upset about – what they were determined to put an end to.

Jaeggi: This is indeed a challenging analysis! So, what we are faced with is more than a simple backlash against women’s emancipation, anti-racism, LGBTQ rights, and all the other movements. This may help explain why right-authoritarian and right-populist movements spend so much energy on discrediting the left-liberal cultural elite and minority politics. In Germany, for example, we are seeing intense attacks on “genderism” and on “politically correct,” queer, multicultural elites, who are cast as rootless cosmopolitans without “Vaterland” (and now even without gender), which evokes strong memories of antisemitic stereotypes.¹⁹ The usual left-wing explanation is that this is just rhetoric aimed at stirring up emotions, when in fact it’s really about the economy and protectionist opposition to neoliberalism. But that is much too superficial. I would say your picture goes a bit deeper in that it does not dismiss either side of the phenomenon. If the problem here is not just neoliberalism but *progressive* neoliberalism, then, in an odd way, neopopulist leaders are actually picking up on something when they lash out against multiculturalism and other progressive causes. It’s not just pent-up racism and it’s not even simply a misplaced reaction to neoliberalism as such; rather, in the picture you’re describing, these movements are targeting a real aspect of the situation. As much as we on the Left support the impulses behind these progressive movements, there is nevertheless a link we have to acknowledge between the form they have taken and neoliberalism – a kind of “alliance” – which has contributed to the situation we’re now faced with. This is an important point and an interesting analysis. There is a connection to be spelled out that, in your view, brings into focus why “political correctness” might not be as absurd a target for the new Right.

Fraser: You’ve stated the basic idea with perfect clarity and genuine insight. The recognition side of the story is not mere ideology, but the very real self-assertion of a social stratum, whose ascension is based at once in the shift to postindustrial, cognitive, globalizing capitalism and in its own self-understanding as culturally and morally superior to the parochial working-class communities whom those shifts have left behind. So, yes, it is both recognition and distribution – or, better yet, a specific way in which those two aspects of justice got interlinked in the era of financialized capitalism. Right-wing populist movements are rejecting the whole package. And, in so doing, they are simultaneously targeting two real, consequential components of a single historic bloc whose hegemony diminished their chances – and those of their children – to live good lives.

Jaeggi: This analysis casts an interesting light on a debate that is raging in Europe. Didier Eribon and others have argued that the Left has abandoned the “social question” and should now get back to it.²⁰ The ensuing discussion should lead to a much-needed process of self-reflection. But I doubt that we could now simply “return” to the social question. That seems to me to underestimate the real scope and character of the crisis. After all, fighting for all-gender bathrooms did not cause the decline of the Rust Belt, nor will the abolition of political correctness solve the problems of the “abandoned poor.” Nor will a simple “return to class issues” do the job. We should not become nostalgic for “traditional” working-class politics, but should take our bearing from the New Left moment – the moment when social critique and artistic critique (to use Boltanski and Chiapello’s concept) have been united.²¹ This is what I would call an “emancipatory” moment and a more solid ground for emancipatory politics.

Fraser: On this point, I mostly agree. Certainly, there’s no going back to old-style class politics. That approach always assumed a narrow definition of class and class struggle, as I said at the outset. So, I would focus on broadening what we mean by the “social question” in a way that makes visible our hidden abodes. The crisis of financialized capitalism has as much to do with ecology, democracy, and

social reproduction as with the organization of paid labor. Those matters must be at the center of any left-wing politics that hopes to challenge the current regime. I would also focus on broadening what we mean by “the working class.” I was very struck by the sharp contrast between the way that category was invoked by Donald Trump, on the one hand, and by Bernie Sanders, on the other. The “working class” Trump conjured was White, straight, male, and Christian, based in mining, drilling, construction, and heavy industry, whereas the “working class” Sanders wooed was broad and expansive, encompassing not only Rust-Belt factory workers, but also domestic, public-sector, and service workers, including women, immigrants, and people of color – not just the exploited, but also the expropriated and the evicted. I don’t mean to idealize Sanders, who is in some ways a bit of a throwback. But his expansive view of “the working class” is already well in advance of the sectors of the Left that you just invoked.

Jaeggi: I want to make another remark, in hopes of pushing the analysis a bit further. It relates to the fact (and we agree on this) that we are confronted with, and should focus our analysis on, crisis tendencies. Even if your analysis of the “alliances” leading up to progressive neoliberalism is correct, I would still maintain that a deeper, crisis- or contradiction-oriented analysis should go beyond this level. If our aim is to locate the causes for the transformations in question (let’s say, in a materialistic spirit), we shouldn’t be looking at these movements and counter-movements alone. We should look also at the emergence of “cognitive capitalism,” along with a political and economic dynamic that prevented the emancipatory transformation required to respond adequately to it.

You have actually spelled out the material causes for the so-called “cultural turn” earlier. And I like this approach. I would also say that what we might call “cultural liberalization” with respect to family values, LGBTQ rights, even minority rights, has become possible through deep-seated economic and social transformations. I don’t want to argue for some kind of one-dimensional determinism here, since certainly the influences go in both directions. The “creative sector” and its innovative potential draws its vitality from the creative impact of new and liberalized forms of life, and vice versa: the latter, too, are made possible in part through the new social settings that unfold with a new economy, with its focus on communicative skills, cooperation, and other dimensions of neoliberal subjectivation. In other words, progressive neoliberalism is a tendency “in the world,” brought about by material conditions, and it would be a mistake to reduce it to a case of misguided political judgments or wrongly chosen alliances.

Yes, social movements do have their role within the transformations in question. But they also require a certain momentum; they rely on “passive elements” (as Marx would say) and ruptures within the institutions and practices of a certain society. If both LGBTQ rights and the decline of the Rust Belt have their roots in the same process of social and economic transformation – that is, if the opening for anti-discrimination rights is the result of a transformation that at the same time leads to a crisis for industrialized regions – this doesn’t put them in “direct opposition.” Nor is one directly or indirectly responsible for the other. Getting rid of gendered toilets won’t bring back a single job in Wisconsin. These two issues – Oliver Nachtwey calls them “horizontal” versus “vertical” equality – are not connected to each other in a direct or causal way.²² It’s only on a symbolic level, on the level of the economy of attention, that they are in competition. This is not an unimportant level, to be sure. But again, paying attention to the underlying transformations, in my view, also means that one shouldn’t overestimate the role of the Left here. I would maintain this, even though I do find your analyses always very fruitful and would sign on to a substantial portion of them.

Fraser: I’m unsure whether you meant to suggest that we disagree about the importance of relating political-hegemonic analysis of social struggles to analysis of objective, systemic crisis. My own view, argued repeatedly throughout this book, is that a critical theory of crisis needs both of those levels. So, I don’t think we disagree there. But perhaps we conceive the linkages between them differently.

In any case, I’m very struck by what you’ve just said about the “material basis” of progressivism. I like the idea of a two-way synergy between cultural liberalization and cognitive capitalist innovation. I also appreciate the idea that, while Rust Belt decline and LGBTQ rights are rooted in the same set of macro-transformations, they need not be mutually antithetical. That accords perfectly with my own

strong sense that aspirations for emancipation and for social protection, which are currently posed as mutually antithetical, can in fact be rendered compatible and mutually supporting. That's actually one of the most fundamental political aims of my analysis: to disclose the possibility of a counterhegemonic alliance between the social forces that are now arrayed against one another as antagonists. But, as I said, it's only by understanding how that opposition was first constructed that we can glimpse a path by which it could be deconstructed – via a new reconfiguration of the triple movement.

I want to stress one further point about the habitus of the progressive professionals and symbolic workers whom you've just described: their confidence that they represent the advance guard of humanity's progression to moral cosmopolitanism and cognitive enlightenment. This sense of cultural superiority has been central to this stratum's identity and posture. But it also functions as a Bourdieusian strategy of "distinction,"²³ imbuing progressive neoliberalism with a superior "tone," which has devolved all too easily into moralizing, fingerpointing, and talking down to rural and working-class people, with the insinuation that they were culturally backward or stupid. It is not hard to understand why this generated *ressentiment*. The insult of status hierarchy compounded the injury of class domination. Right-wing populists like Trump have exploited that sentiment.

Jaeggi: I think you can find old-fashioned left-wing radicals who share this kind of *ressentiment* as well, I assure you! And I agree completely about the moralism and the finger-pointing. Moralism is always a sign of the weakness of the Left, of its fading out into some kind of humanitarianism.

But I think many of the activists who call out racist or sexist discourse would probably advance a different interpretation of what they are doing. I for my part agree that the gesture is often terribly moralistic. But I think we also agree that the power relations keeping racism, sexism, and homophobia in place are built on a rather intricate web of individually quotidian slurs, jokes, improper advances, and microaggressions. With this in mind, much of what appears to be moral condescension can also be read as a reflection of the kinds of social phenomena that need to be addressed; the aim is to alter power relations, not simply dole out moral blame. I also think the observable moralism is partly created by the absence of a broad movement that embodies a different praxis, and that helps set the stage for an encounter between the masses of "normal" people and some isolated liberal elites chiding them.

Fraser: I'm in agreement with your last point. To call out progressives for their condescension is not at all to imply that racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, and other forms of discrimination are unreal or unimportant. But it does suggest that much of the current opposition to those injustices assumes a shallow and inadequate view of them – that it grossly exaggerates the extent to which the problems are inside people's heads, while missing the depth of the structural-institutional forces that undergird them. Certainly, this criticism does not apply to the left-wing segments of the opposition, which represent the minority. For the broader progressive mainstream, however, it is all too apt.

Let me explain what I mean by reference to race, which remains a burning political issue in the United States. You might not know it from observing the current obsession with microaggressions, but racial oppression in the US today is not at bottom a matter of demeaning attitudes or bad behavior, although these surely exist. The crux is rather the racially specific impacts of deindustrialization and financialization in the period of progressive-neoliberal hegemony, as refracted through long histories of systemic oppression. In this period, Black and brown Americans, who had long been denied credit, confined to inferior segregated housing, and paid too little to accumulate savings, were systematically targeted by purveyors of subprime loans and consequently experienced the highest rates of home foreclosures in the country. In this period, too, minority towns and neighborhoods that had long been systematically starved of public resources were clobbered by plant closures in declining manufacturing centers; their losses were reckoned not only in jobs but also in tax revenues, which deprived them of funds for schools, hospitals, and basic infrastructure maintenance, leading eventually to debacles like Flint – and, in a different context, to the Lower 9th Ward of New Orleans.²⁴ Finally, Black men long subject to differential sentencing and harsh imprisonment, coerced labor, and socially tolerated violence, including at the hands of police, were in this period massively conscripted into a

“prison-industrial complex,” kept full to capacity by a “war on drugs” focused on possession of crack cocaine and by disproportionately high rates of unemployment, all courtesy of bipartisan legislative “achievements,” orchestrated largely by Bill Clinton. Need one add that, inspiring though it was, the presence of an African-American in the White House failed to make a dent in these developments?

What I’m trying to get at here is the depth at which racism is anchored in contemporary capitalist society – and the incapacity of progressive-neoliberal moralizing to address it. (This is equally the case for sexism and other axes of domination that are structurally grounded in capitalist society.) As I understand them, the structural bases of racism have as much to do with class and political economy as with status and (mis)recognition. Equally important, the forces that are destroying the life chances of people of color belong to the same dynamic complex as those that are destroying the life chances of Whites – even if some of the specifics differ.

I offer this analysis as a corrective to the shallow moralizing that prevails today in progressive circles. What should distinguish the Left from such postures is a focus on the fundamental structural bases of social oppression. By framing the problem in terms of capitalism, understood as an institutionalized social order, the Left should insist that racism (for example) has structural bases in capitalist society, that it must be fought not only culturally but also institutionally, by transforming the constitutive separations we’ve discussed throughout this book. That’s the alternative to progressive moralism that I support – not dismissing racism and sexism as “superstructural,” but insisting that they are structural and deeply imbricated with class (and gender) domination, that they can neither be understood nor overcome in abstraction from the latter. That’s an additional advantage of our expanded view of capitalism as an institutionalized social order. It shows that we don’t actually need to pit class domination and status hierarchy against one another. Both are part and parcel of capitalist society, co-products of its structural divisions. Both can and must be opposed together.

Jaeggi: Maybe we can dig a bit deeper into the conditions for the weakness of the Left. For sure, it is not just bad judgment regarding whom to team up with. This unfortunate alliance between neoliberalism and emancipation – can it still be framed in terms of recognition and redistribution? Isn’t it the case that the struggle for cultural hegemony is part of the *liaisons dangereuses* and also part of the anger and *ressentiment* you are referring to? Isn’t the neglect of the working class also a neglect in the “cultural” dimension, a misrecognition in terms of their lifestyle, form of life, and – if you will – “culture?” The working class, the abandoned poor, and the “non-bohemian” segments of the precariat are not only economically deprived; they are also culturally deprived.

It’s not simply that the established voices have dropped the class issue. They’ve also been actively promoting, and even in some ways sensationalizing, cultural issues in media and television, particularly with regard to issues of sexuality and non-heteronormative or non-cis gender identities. If we’re talking about cultural hegemony, these are the kinds of issues that “sell”: they’re interesting enough, they’re sexy enough, and they’re “bohemian” enough to attract public attention, whereas the “totally boring” struggles of the working class can’t get attention unless they’re portrayed as meth dealers or in some other sensational way. In Germany in the 1970s, there was a famous left-wing book by Erika Runge based on interviews with working-class women.²⁵ It was a huge bestseller then, but you couldn’t imagine someone doing this now – being that interested in the fate and everyday struggles of working-class women. (Arlie Hochschild is an exception, but, in fact, the attention that her recent book, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, received had a lot to do with the aftermath of the US election.²⁶)

But then, getting back to the question of redistribution and recognition: Isn’t the neglect of class struggle also a neglect in terms of recognition? I doubt that these two issues – the redistribution issue and the recognition issue – can be separated. The anger you referred to is not simply an anger caused by economic deprivation. After all, Trump is certainly not a member of the “working class” when it comes to income, wealth, resources, and opportunities, but he speaks to them with respect to certain elements of habitus and lifestyle. So, his appeal has to do not only with the way he speaks to economic

grievances (which he is not going to address anyway – quite the opposite) but with a certain charisma at the cultural level. He’s sort of an “underclass billionaire” – he has the language, he has the attitude, he has the *ressentiment* – and so there’s something about it that doesn’t seem to be fake.

Fraser: Actually, there’s a huge revival of interest now in “the working class,” its culture, politics and self-understanding. Unfortunately, however, the term is still usually defined in the narrow, old-fashioned way, which has the effect of suggesting that the problems of that class are something different from and in competition with the problems of women, immigrants, and people of color!

I gather that’s also the notion that you have in mind when you speak about the non-recognition of working-class culture – and of the deep appeal of Donald Trump to those who imagine that they see under-appreciated facets of themselves writ large in him. That’s a fascinating idea and well worth exploring. But let me suggest another hypothesis, which points in a different direction, by aiming to explain why Trump appealed to those who might *not* think he resembles them. I’m thinking especially of White women. I assume you know that a majority of them voted for him, about 52 percent in fact, notwithstanding the Access Hollywood tapes, in which he boasted of being able to “grab [women] by the pussy” with impunity. It’s doubtful that women’s votes for Trump were based on identification. His appeal might lie instead in his pugnaciousness, his readiness to fight at the drop of a hat. That’s the point at which the image of the predator morphs into that of the protector, someone who’s in your corner and has your back. For people who are being expropriated and who feel not just neglected or unrecognized but *exposed* and *unprotected*, that’s pretty powerful stuff. And it sits right on the intersection of distribution and recognition, implicating them both.

Since you asked about those categories, I want to say a bit more about how I am using them here, in conjunction with some Gramscian concepts, to analyze our current hegemonic crisis. My strategy is not to separate distribution and recognition, but rather to parse the construction and deconstruction of a hegemonic commonsense, and with it the rise and fall of an associated historical bloc – all with a view to assessing the prospects for an emancipatory social transformation. Recognition and distribution are central to this analysis for historical reasons. Since at least the mid twentieth century in the United States and Europe, capitalist hegemonies have been forged by combining views about those two different aspects of justice. What made Trump and Trumpism possible was the discrediting of progressive neoliberalism’s distinctive normative nexus of distribution and recognition. By parsing the construction and break-up of that nexus, we can clarify not only Trumpism, but also the prospects, post-Trump, for a counterhegemonic bloc that could resolve the crisis. Let me illustrate the point by returning once more to the United States.

Prior to Trump’s rise to power, US political commonsense was highly restricted – built, as I said before, around the opposition between two variants of neoliberalism: one progressive, the other regressive. What was offered, in other words, was a clear choice between two different politics of recognition, but only one (neoliberal) politics of distribution: you could choose between multiculturalism and ethnonationalism, but you were stuck, either way, with financialization and deindustrialization. This left a *gap* in the hegemonic organization of political life: an empty, unoccupied zone, where an egalitarian, pro-labor, anti-neoliberal distributive politics might have taken root. And that left a sizable segment of Americans, victims of financialization and globalization, without a political voice. Given the social processes that were all the while grinding away at their life conditions, it was only a matter of time before someone would proceed to occupy that empty space and fill the gap.

There were some rumblings in this direction in 2007/8 (with the financial crisis and Obama’s election) and again in 2011 (with the eruption of Occupy Wall Street). But the hegemonic order remained largely intact, at least on the surface. Then, in 2015/16, the earthquake finally struck. The usual scripts were up-ended by a pair of outsiders, causing both major political establishments to appear to collapse. Challenging their respective party apparatchiks (bosses, pundits, *éminences grises*, and big donors), both Trump and Sanders excoriated neoliberalism’s “rigged economy,” but espoused two sharply divergent views of recognition. The immediate result was to put two new political options on the table: *reactionary populism* and *progressive populism*. But neither of those options actually materialized.

Sanders's loss to Hillary Clinton removed the progressive-populist option from the ballot. And once in power, as I already said, Trump dropped his economic populism, while doubling down on his reactionary politics of recognition, which became hugely intensified and ever more vicious. What we have gotten, as I said before, is a *hyper-reactionary neoliberalism*.

However, hyper-reactionary neoliberalism is not a new hegemonic bloc. It is rather an unstable, chaotic amalgam. That's due partly to Trump's psychology and partly to his dysfunctional co-dependency with the Republican Party establishment. But there is also a deeper problem. By shutting down the economic-populist face of his campaign, Trump is effectively trying to reinstate the very hegemonic gap he helped to explode in 2016. Ironically, he is being joined in that endeavor by the Clintonite wing of "the resistance," which hopes to revive progressive neoliberalism in some new guise, and thereby to return the public sphere to its previous state as a populism-free zone. However, neither the Clintonites nor Trump himself can suture the hegemonic gap, in my opinion. The populist cat is out of the bag and is not about to slink quietly away. The result is an unstable interregnum, with no secure hegemony.

That's the situation confronting the Left today. I want to consider whether it offers an opening for the construction of a counterhegemonic bloc. If so, the likeliest candidate seems to me to be some new variant of *progressive populism* – one that combines an egalitarian, pro-working-class distributive program with an inclusive, nonhierarchical vision of a just recognition order – or, as I said before, emancipation plus social protection.

Jaeggi: I do have one additional question. If we want to talk about the triple movement and a new alliance between emancipation and social protection, we need a left-wing response to the question about what social protection in a globalized world should look like – who should be protected or who belongs in the "circle" of people who are counted under social protection. People like Trump, Le Pen, or Nigel Farage answer quite simply that we need to go back to the nationstate and that national borders should provide the means for defining those who should be socially protected, and clearly part of the appeal of these movements has to do with the idea of protecting the economy within national borders. This idea of returning to national protection also carries some appeal among certain left-wing voices, and so the motivation behind it is something that the Left will have to address.

Fraser: This is a pressing and difficult question. I'm convinced, for starters, that the genie of globalization is too far out of the bottle to be put back in. That's one reason why Brexit and Trump (among others) cannot deliver on their promises to working-class voters. In the UK, the short- and medium-term consequences of Brexit will not be social protection at all but increased exposure to globalization, because, absent its EU agreements, the Brits (or what's left of them, given Scottish and Northern Irish unhappiness) will be hanging out there on their own. The same is true for the US: the moment Trump scrapped the Trans-Pacific Partnership, China announced that it would pursue its own regional trade deal with the Asian countries. So, it's not as if you can actually protect yourself simply by tearing up these agreements, even though – it is true – they are stacked in favor of capital and against workers. In the absence of transnational or global coordination, what you get is rival national or regional protectionisms. And this is dangerous. Just think of the late 1920s and 1930s, when escalating competition among national protectionisms led directly to world war.

In sum, social protection cannot be envisioned today in a national frame. As I noted earlier, even state-managed capitalism – which synthesized marketization with social protection – required Bretton Woods and other forms of international coordination. And, of course, that approach did nothing to counteract the vast discrepancies in state capacity to deliver social protection, which are the enduring legacy of colonialism. Quite the contrary! The state-managed model worked by siphoning value from periphery to core; in effect, it made metropolitan protection dependent on (post-)colonial exposure to predation. So, it cannot be a model for us. Moreover, we face some pressing issues, such as climate change and financial regulation, which simply cannot be handled at the national level. These issues really do demand some form of global governance. Lastly, as we discussed in [chapters 1](#) and [2](#),

capitalism is and always has been a global dynamic. Whatever solutions we might develop – even ones designed to promote certain kinds of autonomy at the national or local level – these have to be developed with this global dynamic in mind.

Going forward

Jaeggi: I want to press you one last time on the assumptions behind your diagnosis. Your claim is that it is this progressive-neoliberal alliance that has created this backlash of reactionary protectionism, but there is also a possible explanation that it has merely opened a floodgate of much more substantial regressive tendencies that were already present and latent. We might also give a thought to the possibility that racism has a dynamics and a power of its own. When Horkheimer and Adorno were faced with National Socialism, they concluded that there are dramatically regressive potentials *built into* the very process of civilization and enlightenment. They came to situate the fundamental problem on a level running deeper than capitalism itself. But, even if we grant that these tendencies are bound up with dynamics particular to capitalism, from the point of view of ideology critique, one could still say that something like sexism was not only functionally necessary to justify women’s indispensable contribution of unpaid reproductive labor. Sexism, like racism, has long served as a means to compensate (White) male workers in an extra-economic sphere for the material exploitation they suffered. So, the current pain might not come from seeing progressivism team up with the neoliberal enemy of one’s class, but from progressivism taking away the “consolation prize” of male privilege or White supremacy.²⁷ Maybe to some this “consolation prize” has become the most real thing, a source of warped recognition and perceived stability. So, increasing inequality and precarity might be bearable, but only so long as that symbolic hierarchy which posits White males on top remains in place. Now that a partially successful emancipation movement is appearing to erode this, we witness a defensive reaction by those desperate to keep in place an outlived ideological structure.

Fraser: I appreciate the depth of the question you raise and the thoughtfulness with which you address it. I can see some truth in the view you attribute to Horkheimer and Adorno, but with one major qualification: I’d locate the source of the deep regressive tendencies in capitalism, not in civilization or enlightenment. I can also see some truth in the “consolation prize” hypothesis. But what follows from that politically? I’d say that a viable left-wing response (whether progressive populist or democratic socialist) has to offer a counter-good to those whose consolation is presently threatened; and that this has to be something more existentially substantial and psychically compelling than “male privilege” or “White-skin privilege.” A posture that is exclusively defensive is not the answer. It takes away existing “consolation” while offering nothing in return. To paraphrase Marx: the goal is not to “pluck ... the imaginary flowers on the chain ... in order that man shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy or consolation, but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower.”²⁸

Jaeggi: Let’s say we accept your diagnosis – that we’re faced with a reactionary social protectionism against a collapsing progressive neoliberalism. What do we do now? We don’t want to be complacent, and we don’t want to take the kind of moralizing stance that will only create an even greater backlash from the Right. At the same time, it’s also clear that most of the Left finds itself in a defensive position. As problematic as progressive neoliberalism has been, isn’t there a certain priority, given the current situation, to defending the progress that has been made, however imperfect? One can fault these movements for not being forward-looking enough or not offering a valid alternative, but it’s also clear we now have to protect the most vulnerable, those who might become targets of these right-wing populist movements. There seems to be some urgency in fending off the racism, xenophobia, and misogyny that are resurgent now. So how do we meet this immediate need to defend existing progress without losing sight of the deeper-lying problems of progressive politics?

Fraser: My instinct is to seize the moment and go on the offensive. I already suggested that neither hyper-reactionary neoliberalism nor progressive neoliberalism will be able to (re)establish a secure hegemony in the coming period and that we face a chaotic, unstable interregnum, which, as you say, is fraught with danger. Nevertheless, there could be an opening now for the construction of a

counterhegemonic bloc around the project of *progressive populism*. By combining in a single project an egalitarian, pro-working-class economic orientation with an inclusive nonhierarchical recognition orientation, this formation would have at least a fighting chance of uniting the *whole* working class: not just the fractions historically associated with manufacturing and construction, whom reactionary populists and traditionalist leftists have mainly addressed, but also those portions of the broader working class who perform domestic, agricultural, and service labor – paid and unpaid, in private firms and private homes, in the public sector and civil society – activities in which women, immigrants, and people of color are heavily represented. By wooing both segments, the expropriated as well as the exploited, a progressive populist project could position the working class, understood expansively, as the leading force in an alliance that also includes substantial segments of youth, the middle class, and the professional–managerial stratum.

For that to happen, working-class supporters of Trump and of Sanders would have to come to understand themselves as allies – differently situated victims of a single “rigged economy,” which they could jointly seek to transform. What speaks in favor of this possibility, in the US at least, is the fact that, between the supporters of Sanders and those of Trump, something approaching a critical mass of American voters rejected the neoliberal politics of distribution in 2015/16. What speaks against it are the deepening divisions, even hatreds, long simmering but recently raised to a fever pitch by Trump, which appear to validate the view, held by some progressives, that all Trump voters are “deplorables” – irredeemable racists, misogynists, and homophobes. Also reinforced is the converse view, held by many reactionary populists, that all progressives are incorrigible moralizers and smug elitists who look down on them while sipping lattes and raking in the bucks. The prospects for progressive populism depend on successfully combating both of those views. That’s where I propose to focus – as I’ve actually already been doing throughout this chapter.

Jaeggi: I wonder whether it might not help to revisit a concept that you have used and that has been around for a while with respect to the diagnosis of our time: the concept of *ressentiment*. It seems as though it’s more than a *façon de parler*; it’s another tool for understanding the inner structure of those dynamics that misdirect social suffering and indignation toward reactionary, authoritarian, and proto-fascist impulses instead of emancipatory movements. I think that this cannot be explained by the ruthless pursuit of self-interest alone, notwithstanding the exclusionary nationalistic tendencies, since people have chosen a politics that openly betrays their interests (Trump, after all, made no secret of his plans to eliminate Obamacare). Even to the extent that you have convincingly sketched out reasons for the hatred of the so-called left-liberal cultural elite, this still doesn’t turn it into a rational decision. And you didn’t mean to suggest that these political affects were legitimate (after all, to understand doesn’t mean to excuse). So, I would say that, even though their real interests are not satisfied, their *ressentiment* is.

This is what makes the concept interesting for an analysis of our situation. Provided that we conceive it not merely as a sociopsychological concept, but as a form of “affect” that is genuinely social, we can examine the deeper structural causes for *ressentiment* as part of a more comprehensive analysis of crisis and regression. *Ressentiment* is what I would call a second-order affect: the starting material of *ressentiment* is not a certain social situation per se, the absence of certain desired social gratifications or goods, but rather a situation normatively judged as bad, undeserved, and unjustified – a situation of indignation and outrage. But there is another element that Max Scheler has pointed to in his brilliant analysis: *ressentiment* always occurs in combination with a feeling of impotence, the feeling of powerlessness.²⁹ And, again, this powerlessness is not merely the impotence against a first-order problem – for example, that I cannot change being unemployed or that I have no health insurance. Rather, the powerlessness which triggers *ressentiment* is the impotence or inability even to express one’s feeling of indignation or outrage. Within a neoliberal culture of “taking responsibility,” one can easily see how people see themselves in a situation in which even their indignation is banned. But this powerlessness is also ascribed to and projected onto the “left-elite.” The supposed “thought ban” – the fact that political correctness prevents them from expressing their vindictive and envious feelings toward those whom they believe “don’t deserve” their respective resources, attention, and public recognition – then becomes (as it must) one of the main fronts. This is why we might expect

ressentiment to be felt even by those who are neither objectively deprived nor objectively powerless, and why it can be directed against those who, objectively speaking, do not have much power at all. Incidentally, at least one study shows that Trump's primary supporters score high with respect to "authoritarianism" across diverse social and economic statuses.³⁰

But it is also clear that *ressentiment* is a defense mechanism. When the limits of order begin to break down (e.g., the dissolution of gender identities or national borders), the precarious work and life situation, as well as the more generalized experience of impotence and precarious social orientation, brings forth the need to be "master in one's own house" ("Build the wall!"). This can only be satisfied in the imagination. Authoritarian *ressentiment* is urgently directed against those who are blamed for having violated and dissolved "the sanctity of the home" and turned "our homeland" into a strange place. But then, to feel "alienated" by this kind of "Heimatverlust" ("loss of home") is itself an instance of an ideological blockage of reality and a denial of the real causes of being alienated. This is what makes it into a moment of regression. Talking about *ressentiment* as a mode of regression here seems to be helpful in order to understand how these emotions are "real" but still illusory.

So, while you oppose closing ranks with progressive neoliberalism and its tendency to frame things in moralizing "us" versus "them" terms, we should still ask whether these reactionary impulses stem from a *ressentiment* against progressive-neoliberal moralizing that in itself is a regressive answer to the conceived crisis. *Not* closing ranks with progressive neoliberals to defend what emancipatory achievements have been made then might present its own dangers.

Fraser: What you say about regression is very interesting and worth developing. But I disagree with the political conclusion you draw from it, which is a variant of the old idea of "lesser evil-ism." This is the Left's habitual posture, dusted off every few years, of ventriloquizing liberal objectives and squelching its own, out of fear of a Trump or an AfD. Although aimed at saving us from "the worst," that strategy actually fertilizes the soil that germinates new and ever more dangerous bogeymen, which in turn justify further deferments – and on and on, in a vicious circle. When it wins, its policies serve not to diminish but rather to stoke populist rage. You yourself have said that the *ressentiment* felt by many right-wing populist supporters is a response to real grievances, even if much of it is currently misdirected toward immigrants and other scapegoats. The proper response from *us* is not moral condemnation but political validation, while redirecting the rage to the systemic predations of finance capital.

That response also serves to answer the suggestion that we should now close ranks with the neoliberals to ward off fascism. The problem is not only that reactionary populism is not (yet) fascism. It is also that, seen analytically, liberalism and fascism are not really two separate things, one of which is good and the other bad, but two deeply interconnected faces of the capitalist world system. Although they are by no means normatively equivalent, both are products of unrestrained capitalism, which everywhere destabilizes lifeworlds and habitats, bringing in its wake both individual liberation and untold suffering. Liberalism expresses the first, liberatory side of this process, while glossing over the rage and pain associated with the second. Left to fester in the absence of an alternative, those sentiments fuel authoritarianisms of every sort, including those that really deserve the name "fascism" and those that emphatically do not. Without a Left, in other words, the maelstrom of capitalist "development" can only generate liberal forces and authoritarian counterforces, bound together in a perverse symbiosis. Thus, far from being the antidote to fascism, (neo)liberalism is its partner in crime. The real charm against fascism (whether proto- or quasi- or real) is a left-wing project that redirects the rage and the pain of the dispossessed toward a deep societal restructuring and a democratic political "revolution." Until very recently, such a project could not even be glimpsed, so suffocatingly hegemonic was neoliberal commonsense. But, thanks to Sanders, Corbyn, Mélenchon, Podemos, the early SYRIZA – imperfect as all of them are – we can again envision an expanded set of possibilities.

In general, then, I'm opposed to closing ranks. In fact, my preferred scenario is just the opposite: namely, separation in the service of realignment. Where you seek unity with the liberals, I would like to see the Left seek to precipitate two major shifts. First, the mass of less privileged women,

immigrants, and people of color have to be wooed away from the lean-in feminists, the meritocratic anti-racists and antihomophobes, and the corporate diversity and green-capitalism skills who hijacked their concerns, inflecting them in terms consistent with neoliberalism. This is the aim of a recent feminist initiative, which seeks to replace “lean-in” with a “feminism for the 99 percent.”³¹ Other emancipatory movements should copy that strategy.

Second, declining working-class communities have to be persuaded to desert their current crypto-neoliberal allies. The trick is to convince them that the forces promoting militarism, xenophobia, and ethnonationalism cannot and will not provide them with the essential material prerequisites for good lives, whereas a progressive-populist bloc just might. In that way, one might separate those right-wing populist voters who could and should be responsive to such an appeal from the card-carrying racists and alt-right ethnonationalists, who are not. I am certain that the former outnumber the latter by a wide margin. I don't deny, of course, that reactionary populist movements draw heavily on loaded rhetoric and have emboldened formerly fringe groups of real White supremacists. But I reject the far too hasty conclusion that the overwhelming majority of reactionary-populist voters are forever closed to appeals on behalf of an expanded working class of the sort evoked by Bernie Sanders and theorized here. That view is not only empirically wrong but counterproductive, likely to be self-fulfilling.

Jaeggi: I appreciate your attempts to differentiate. And yes, of course, if we don't want to give up, we need to watch out for possible realignments. It's true, too, that left-wing politics has to be offensive, demanding more to make even the tiniest increments of progress. At the same time, going on the offensive cannot mean just deepening the confrontation on the same terms as before. Nor can it mean following the same strategy of “closing ranks” against regressive movements in a more forceful or radical way. It is necessary, rather, to develop an alternative project and an emancipatory social movement that can attract those who are not hardcore fascists and that speaks to their real grievances. On these points, we agree.

But let me ask a provocative question. It almost sounds like there is some way in which you think that our current situation opens up more prospects for the Left than there were before. Maybe “optimism” is too strong a word, but to the extent that these events have disturbed the security of neoliberal hegemony, perhaps you see an opening for the Left to break away from the kind of politics that have led to this situation. For my part, I still find the massive shift toward radical right-wing, nationalistic, racist, and sexist politics too disturbing to maintain much optimism; and, as I already said, it is still unclear to me whether we really are “breaking away from neoliberalism.”

Fraser: Well, I've already said that neoliberalism persists as policy, including under Trump. What has crumbled is progressive-neoliberal *hegemony*. It's precisely that combination that defines the present conjuncture: on the one hand, an ongoing, decades-long assault on living standards in the broadest sense, which transcends “the economic”; on the other hand, the delegitimation of the regime and the parties that have perpetrated or supported that assault. That's the background against which I interpret your question. Does this conjuncture contain new opportunities for the Left, opportunities that were not available before the unraveling of progressive-neoliberal hegemony?

I want to say three things in response to that question. The first is that, for the overwhelming majority of people, any gains delivered by progressive neoliberalism have been very small. This is not only true for those who have defected to right-wing populism. It holds as well for those who have stuck with the progressive or center-left parties – parties that hijacked their claims while advancing neoliberalization. I mean the mass of women, immigrants, people of color, and non-cis and non-hetero people. Granted, these groups won some significant rights on paper. But those rights were won just as neoliberalization was eroding the necessary material conditions for their exercise. The vast majority did not fully share in the benefits, which went overwhelmingly to the professional–managerial stratum and the 1%. Members of these groups have a lot to gain from a Left, which is why so many of them have been attracted to Sanders, Mélenchon, Podemos, and Jeremy Corbyn. It's a mistake to think defensively, about what they now have to lose. They can and should be wooed by the Left, as should the winnable working-class fractions of reactionary populism. One should adopt this sort of “optimism,” if that's

what it is, less as an empirical prediction than as a pragmatic presupposition of our action. To assume the alternative, “pessimistic” stance is to foreclose possibilities and ensure defeat.

That was point one, and here is point two: We’ve talked previously about the objective side of crisis. We talked about the near-implosion of the global financial order in 2007/8; we’ve talked about climate change; we’ve talked about the crisis of social reproduction, about the terrible deterioration of living conditions and lifeworlds and people’s capacity to care for their families under this neoliberal assault. That’s the objective crisis. What we now have is the crisis at the level of hegemony – the social action or participant side of crisis. For a long time, this side of crisis did not appear, and I for one wondered when it would appear. Now it has appeared.

Jaeggi: But on the wrong terms! And with possibly dangerous outcomes.

Fraser: Well, history doesn’t always unfold the way we want it to! Nevertheless, we now have not only an objective system crisis but also a hegemonic political crisis. I repeat: as a *hegemonic* project, neoliberalism is finished; it may retain its capacity to dominate, but it has lost its ability to persuade. And I can’t pretend to be unhappy about that. But that doesn’t mean that I am in a position to make any predictions about what will happen next. What are the chances that the progressive-populist protection-plus-emancipation scenario I’ve been proposing will actually come to pass? What are the chances that the current crisis will galvanize struggles of sufficient breadth and vision to transform the present regime in an emancipatory direction? I have no way of knowing. And it’s much too soon to hazard a guess. But I will say this: I didn’t see many openings for the emergence of a new Left before, and I do see some now.

And here, finally, is point three: the roots of all of these crisis phenomena, the social as well as the structural, lie in the multiple, deep-seated contradictions of capitalism that our expanded conception has brought to light. The crisis phenomena we’ve been discussing represent the acute form those contradictions assume today, in financialized capitalism. If that is right, then this crisis will not be resolved by tinkering with this or that policy. The path to its resolution can only go through the deep structural transformation of this social order. What is required, above all, is to overcome financialized capitalism’s rapacious subjugation of polity to economy, reproduction to production, non-human nature to “human society” – but this time without sacrificing either emancipation or social protection. This in turn requires reinventing the institutional separations that constitute capitalist society. Whether the result will be compatible with capitalism at all remains to be seen.

Jaeggi: I certainly admire your vigor. But this sounds a bit like the old left-wing strategy that hopes for a “sharpening of the contradictions.” This strategy didn’t always work out. Rosa Luxemburg’s alternative between “socialism or barbarism” might not exhaust the realm of options. What we agree about, nevertheless, is that we live in an open situation. And without an emancipatory project that goes beyond the alternatives people seem to be stuck with today, things might get ugly.

Fraser: The contradictions are sharpening whether we want them to or not, that old anti-Left canard notwithstanding. The real issue is how we respond to the sharpening – and to the ugly stuff that comes in its wake. On that, I believe we agree. If we fail to pursue a transformative politics now, we will prolong the present interregnum. And that means condemning working people of every gender, persuasion, and color to mounting stress and declining health, to ballooning debt and overwork, to class apartheid and social insecurity. It means immersing them, too, in an ever-vaster expanse of morbid symptoms – in hatreds born of resentment and expressed in scapegoating, in outbreaks of violence followed by bouts of repression, in a vicious dog-eat-dog world where solidarities contract to the vanishing point. To avoid that fate, we must break definitively both with neoliberal economics and with the various politics of recognition that have lately supported it – casting off not just exclusionary ethnonationalism but also liberal-meritocratic individualism. Only by joining a robustly egalitarian politics of distribution to a substantively inclusive, class-sensitive politics of recognition can we build a counterhegemonic bloc that could lead us beyond the current crisis to a better world.

Notes

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10. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2000); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
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14. Nancy Fraser, “From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump – and Beyond,” *American Affairs* 1, no. 4 (2017): 46–64.
15. Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 446–7.
16. Nancy Fraser, “Progressive Neoliberalism versus Reactionary Populism: A Hobson’s Choice,” in *The Great Regression*, ed. Heinrich Geiselberger (Cambridge: Polity, 2017). A shorter version appeared as “The End of Progressive Neoliberalism,” *Dissent* (2017).

17. See Hester Eisenstein, “A Dangerous Liaison? Feminism and Corporate Globalization,” *Science & Society* 69, no. 3 (2005): 487–518; Nancy Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History,” *New Left Review* 56 (2009): 97–117.
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19. For analyses of anti-genderism and its relation to the recent wave of right-wing populism and authoritarianism, see Sabine Hark and Paula Irene Villa (eds.), *Anti-Genderismus* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2015). For an illuminating analysis, see Eva von Redecker, “‘Anti-Genderismus’ and Right-Wing Hegemony,” *Radical Philosophy* 198 (July/August, 2016): 2–7.
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24. Editor’s note: Fraser is referring here to two famous cases in which majority-Black communities in the US suffered grave harms due to the systematic failure of federal, state, and local governments to invest in the maintenance and repair of crumbling infrastructure. In 2014, the 100,000 residents of Flint, Michigan – once a proud center of automobile manufacturing, but now an icon of deindustrialization and urban decay – were exposed to high levels of lead contamination in the water supply, as a result of such deprivation. The Lower 9th Ward is the largely Black neighborhood in New Orleans that suffered the most extensive damage when Hurricane Katrina struck the US in August 2005. The handling of Hurricane Katrina was notorious not only for the massive lack of preparedness, poor coordination, and slow and inadequate response, but also for the long-term failure of the government to build and maintain the levees needed to protect the neighborhood from storm surges.
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27. See von Redecker, “‘Anti-Genderismus’ and Right-Wing Hegemony.”
28. Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law*, trans. Jack Cohen, Clemens Dutt, Martin Milligan, Barbara Ruhemann, Dirk J. Struik, and Christopher Upward, in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. III, p. 178.
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