



## Transcription

Democracy in Question? – Season 1, Episode 4

### **Can liberal democracy right the wrongs of racial and gender injustices?**

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**SR:** Welcome to "Democracy in Question," the podcast that reflects on the crises of representative democracy in these troubled times. I'm Shalini Randeria the director of the Albert Hirschman Center on Democracy at the Graduate Institute in Geneva, and the rector of the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna.

[00:00:30] I'm joined today by Nancy Fraser. Nancy is Professor of Philosophy and Politics at The New School for Social Research in New York. She's widely known for her work on philosophical conceptions of justice and injustice. Her latest book "On the Crisis of Capitalism," integrates feminist issues into the critique of capitalist society. It's indeed a great pleasure to have you here, Nancy.

**NF:** Thank you so much. It's a pleasure for me as well.

**SR:** In this episode, we're going to dive straight into a very broad and an incredibly important idea which has been at the center of your scholarship, the question of justice. We've seen some really important social movements grab our attention recently, the women's marches, the climate change protests, the Black Lives Matter movement, as millions of people gather to show their discontent with social, political, economic, and environmental injustices.

So, the question I'd like to discuss with you is, can liberal democracy provide the distributive justice citizens so strongly desire. Whether we're thinking of Black communities, Muslims, Latina, Dalits in India, or the Roma in Eastern Europe, minorities have become the object of hate campaigns and of structural violence. As nation states everywhere break their social contract with minority communities, the promises of liberalism, multiculturalism, secularism, freedom for all, are under serious threat. You have argued forcefully that a political agenda based exclusively on identity and a politics of recognition fails to achieve justice, because injustice is multidimensional.

Two of those dimensions, I want to talk with you today about, questions of race questions of gender. So, let's first start with the current Black Lives Matter movement. Does an understanding of social transformation based on both recognition and redistribution constitute an inseparable whole for Black Lives Matter activists?

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**NF:** Yes, I think that there is actually built in to the practice of this social movement, a sense of both of these absolutely indispensable dimensions of justice, or I should say, injustice, the injustices of economic distribution and other forms of distribution on the one side, and of recognition, the sense of belonging, status as full citizens, and so on and so forth. In their practice, there has been a lot of focus, of course, on the criminal justice system. But built into

that is the relationship between this vulnerability to police violence and state violence and poor housing, poor health care, poor employment.

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When activists refer to structural injustice, it's the indication of the depth at which a whole range of seemingly separate social problems are actually related and anchored in a social system. But right now, BLM is one important indication and one important force within a broader situation of political contestation and political turmoil, which reflects a widespread sense that there's a very deep structural crisis in society that affects the whole social order. It's a crisis of public health. It's a crisis of ecology. It's a crisis of gender injustice, as well as you know, familiar crises of economy, finance, and so on and so forth. There's such a sense of how big this crisis is that I think many social actors are inclined to want to try to think in a structural way, about what connects all of this. And it's what's giving me a sense of hope.

**SR:** Racial injustice has been with us since centuries. Black Lives Matter is not new. And what we did see is a sudden strengthening of the movement and enormous support for it in the U.S., but also an unexpected resonance worldwide, and among communities not directly affected. Something triggered this massive support.

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**NF:** Everything depends upon the context and what we could call the conjuncture, the way in which different levels of social reality and experience come together at a particular moment. And you're right that Black Lives Matter found a very intense and widespread resonance within the U.S. and globally. It's a reaction at the most concrete level, to the availability of cell phone videos where people can see in real time, horrific acts of state violence, with people pleading that they can't breathe. And, you know, some horrific, macho cop refusing to unobstruct the windpipe. I mean, to see all this in real time is shocking.

[00:06:00] But there's also within the U.S. the history of college students doing Black studies or ethnic studies, or, you know, there's been a lot of preparatory work in education that has given people the terms in which to interpret this. But I think that beyond that, going back to this widespread lived experience of a crisis, we can't underestimate the importance of that right-wing authoritarianism, because in the U.S. this is all erupting right near the end of Trump's last term. There's a sense that we're *in extremis*, that you cannot sit and watch this. You have not just the police, but you have the president, fog-horning to white supremacist, alt-right ethnonationalist forces, and the sense that it's all just too overt. You can't sit silent. It's just like the society is coming apart at the seams. And now you've got people saying, "No more, it's time to be out there."

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**SR:** We've seen in many, many parts of the world, right wing authoritarianism mobilize cultural identity politics quite effectively. And for better, or for worse, identity seems to remain a central puzzle for democratic politics. So, the question for me would be, do you think there's an identity politics possible, that does not become identitarian?

**NF:** Anytime you mobilize in a movement in any kind of group formation, a political party, you are in effect, whether you say it in these terms, or not, modeling what it means what it looks like to be an ideal typical claimant or citizen or whatever. So, at this level, identity is always in play. But that's not the same as identity politics in the emphatic sense of actually turning it into the explicit focus of the struggle, in which you are saying, "We are the people, they are not, my identity has been disrespected and I am focused now on winning recognition or respect for it." That's a much more emphatic sense. It carries with it the risk of taking a stereotype that can't possibly do justice to the full variety and heterogeneity of a group of people and saying, "We are this and if you don't fit it, so much, the worse for you."

[00:09:00] So, and then when you add to this a single minded focus on identity defense ends up displacing the structural issues of political economy, distributive injustice, you can get a disconnect, a tendency to make everything

about representation, virtue signaling, it's always about transforming the self as opposed to the social structure. Racism is a matter of bad ideas in the heads of individuals. And then we correct it through what is famously criticized as political correctness. We call out people who speak the wrong way who, etc., etc. It's not that there's nothing to that, but it's so shallow. It doesn't even begin to get at the underpinnings, the organization of power that makes that possible.

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**SR:** So, let me turn to a second element of the social structure which has played such an important role in your own work, gender. What we are getting at the moment is an enormous backlash against feminism and against women's rights, as women's bodies have once again become a political battleground. So, the right to abortion, access to contraception are under massive attack not only in the United States, but also in Poland. Pronatalist policies are being advanced in India and in Turkey, all over Central Asia in the name of demographic security, gender has become a dirty word. So, the fate of so many of these women's rights and freedoms hangs in balance that we once thought we had won, once and for all. So, I ask myself, Nancy, where did we go wrong?

**NF:** I think we imagined an ever-progressive forward march into greater and greater democracy and social justice. And we're caught up short by the ease

with which things can be set back. What's crucial is understanding the conjuncture to use that word again, in which our politics is operating. And to get a sense of how our own actions with the best intentions, can end up contributing or running up against other forces in a way that produces unintended effects and, in some cases, perverse effects. So, let me talk again about the United States. In the U.S. over the decades since the outbreak of a radical second wave feminism in the 1960s and '70s, which had a rather broad and ambitious agenda for overcoming structural sexism. In the decades following that, we've had a kind of normalization of feminist politics. And it began more and more to look like a movement that was especially concerned more with meritocracy, than with social equality, with knocking down barriers that prevented talented qualified individual women from rising in the corporate world, from rising in the military hierarchy in all of the institutions.

[00:12:30] Whereas I think the earlier second wave feminism was concerned with abolishing social hierarchies instead of winning representation for women within it. This was very problematic to the degree that it abandoned the overwhelming majority of women who are not in the strata that could benefit from that kind of politics. But it also left feminism undefended against neotraditionalizing resurgence of patriarchy that you're talking about. That politics was able to make a semi-persuasive case, for the view that feminism is an elite project, that the real interests of the masses of women are for social protection by strong men. Feminism became associated with individualism,



careerism, with trying to slough off your child rearing and other responsibilities on to low wage people you could pay to do the work. This is not the whole story about feminism, but it had enough plausibility. The field of working class left behind rural people whose grievances were stoked by these right-wing patriarchs.

[00:14:00] There was a very stark division created with feminism on one side as if it had nothing to offer the working class, including working class women. So anyway, this is just an example of how a social movement can change its focus over time in the context that pulls it in one direction and how it can get used by stronger forces within that minefield.

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**SR:** Is that what you try to address in your "Feminism for the 99%," in the manifesto, the F99 manifesto?

**NF:** Yes, it was an attempt. It is an attempt to try to give a name to something that I think is already happening. And that is an alternative feminism to this liberal meritocratic feminism that we've been talking about. A lot of it is about what you could call an intersectionalist vision, a vision that says you can't actually improve the lives of women, if you aren't also dealing with issues of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, because women's lives are marked by all of these things. And the whole idea that you could just isolate gender, and say,

"Our politics is concerned only with gender," and think that you were defining gender in a genuinely universal way that would benefit all women, that's a huge misunderstanding, a huge misunderstanding.

We can't even say what a gender issue is, unless we look at the lives of women crosscut by these other axes of injustice and inequality, to understand their situations and their needs and their hopes. So that was one aspect of it.

Another was to make the argument that a feminism for the 99% has to be anti-capitalist, that the real anchor of sexism of gender injustice is the peculiarly capitalist separation of economic production, from social reproduction.

[00:16:30] In almost all previous societies, these things have been intertwined. Men and women always did different kinds of work in most societies. But their work was all part of the same social universe. Capitalism introduces a very brutal split between sort of two worlds, the world in which people go out to mines and factories, and eventually offices, and get cash wages for what they do, and the world in which they stay home in a separate space, and don't receive monetary compensation for their work. Our claim is that that structure is one of the defining structures of a capitalist society. And it's one of the principal anchors of gender inequality in its capitalist form. And as it turns out, anti-capitalism is also crucial for addressing those other intersecting axes, race, class, and so on.

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**SR:** So, Nancy, I want to take up one point, which connects to the book that you've been writing [Note: A new book, which has not been published yet]. And that is your point on the nature of capitalism today, that it's not just new liberalism, but that it's based really on extraction, extraction of natural resources, extraction of women's labor, of women's reproductive labor, and you call it *cannibal capitalism*. So, what is it that you mean by cannibal capitalism? And how do you think overcoming that may lead to changes in the very nature of liberal democracy itself?

**NF:** I'm glad you mentioned liberal democracy again, because I feel that to pose the question, "Can liberal democracy address and solve these problems?" is a misleading formulation. Liberal democracy is essentially a set of political institutions and a set of political values and norms, which are perfectly good ones compared to many alternatives. But it's not a free-standing thing. It sits on and relies on a whole organization of family life of production and economic life, of our metabolic interaction with nature. And all of that is, if you like, just to use an old Marxian phrase, the material base of liberal democracy. And that's where this idea of cannibal capitalism comes in. Marx has the whole story about the owners versus the producers, the exploitation of wage labor. It's not that that's false, but it's very partial, because that too, sits on something else. And that is all those unwaged activities. It's all the forms of care work of domestic labor, but also labor in communities at the

grassroots level, in villages in civil society, all of those activities that forge the social bonds, that make exchange and buying and selling possible. Also, all those inputs from non-human nature, the fertility of the land, of the seas, as well as breathable air potable water.

[00:20:00] All of this is another material base. And there is a racial ethnic imperialist dimension too that is all the forms of dependent unfree, or semi-free labor, that is sort of scarfed up, whose fruits are fed into the system, but that remain formally outside the official wage labor system, all of that wealth that is confiscated that is in one way or another, simply seized through one man's or another often through predatory debt arrangements, land dispossession, and so on. All of that wealth feeds into capitalism to official capitalism and makes it possible.

So, this book is an attempt to try to develop what I call an enlarged view of capitalism. Capitalism is not an economy, it's something much bigger. I call it an institutionalized social order that positions the economy in a certain relation to its background conditions of possibility, and does so in a way that is deeply perverse and self-destabilizing, because it basically empowers private economic powers, to take what they want, to help themselves without having any responsibility to replenish replace the background conditions. So, it's predatory, it is cannibalistic, it just eats it up. And we are left with the wreckage, with the befouled seas and air, the exhausted caregivers, and so on

and so forth. And that means that the struggle to change, reform or even end capitalism is much bigger than the struggles of organized labor. It involves all of the various groups of people who are fighting back against being cannibalized.

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**SR:** Thank you so much, Nancy, for having brought home so forcefully to us that liberal democracy can only go so far, in that it uses legal remedies to redress the wrongs of structure injustices of race and gender. These deep structural pathologies cannot be removed at the political level, because they are tied inextricably to cannibal capitalism, as you call it, that pervades all our social relationships. Thank you so much, Nancy, for this wonderful conversation.

**NF:** I'm very happy to have had the chance to converse with you.

**SR:** This concludes today's episode of "Democracy in Question." Thank you very much for listening.