

Interview

“There’s a new form of imperialism, that doesn’t have the clean geography of the colonists there, and the colonised here” - The battle for neoliberal hegemony

Wednesday 20 January 2016, by [FRASER Nancy](#), [HERNANDEZ Roque Urbietta](#), [NAVARRO Fabiola](#) (Date first published: 19 January 2016).

The conditions of working-class people in the global north are converging with the conditions of the global south.

Over the past two decades, we have witnessed a permanent global crisis in our political systems, from an increasingly precarious labour market to mass media monopolisation. On a recent visit to Paris, we sat down with the post-socialist philosopher Nancy Fraser, author of *Fortunes of feminism: from state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis* (Verso, 2013) to discuss the historical context of the economic crisis, global mobilisations, and transnational autonomy. How do these three political perspectives interact, in an ever-evolving, critical economic scenario that makes visible the differences between the global north and south?

Roque Urbietta Hernandez and Fabiola Navarro: How can we explain the actions of reclamation that are happening across Europe, from your experience as a feminist activist?

Nancy Fraser: After the oil crisis in Latin America in the late 1970s, social mobilizations created solidarity networks that announced organizational autonomy. In the 1980s, Latin America really experienced the assault of neoliberalism first, in a postcolonial society, under a global capitalist subordination to the global north. The impact, I gather, was quite severe, and so these practices of finding other ways outside the official economy and the state to survive, to develop, to hopefully flourish, to organize resistance, was developed first in this region.

It’s only more recently that the global north, in southern Mediterranean Europe – such as Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, earlier Ireland – is experiencing a very severe assault in the form of austerity. So I think that in places like Greece or Spain, people are, out of necessity, practising some of the same kind of strategies that we have seen in Latin America. Whether they use the same language to describe it, whether they describe it as autonomy or horizontality, I don’t know, but I do think that in these practices, there must be resemblances.

RH & FN: Are we witnessing a transnational debate regarding the neo-colonisation of periphery economies?

NF: A transnational debate among whom? The left? Not so much in the mainstream, the Germans couldn’t possibly be debating this. They couldn’t care less. Maybe the opening of thinking about these questions is the fact that the old core-periphery dualism doesn’t really hold anymore. You have

the so-called rise of the BRIC, including Brazil, China, India, Russia, you have the de-industrialisation of the old core, the movement of manufacturing, what used to be called the periphery, but now is much of the industrial world.

We have the terrible impoverishment of the old industrial cities, of the global north, which are starting to look more and more like the periphery. If you look at Detroit, or many of those places...and you have the new wealth in China and other industrialised places, then we need a more complicated map, rather than simply 'core-periphery'.

We need to look at two things. Both, the relocation of manufacturing, and industry, and the rise of finance and debt. So, if there is a debate, it has to be somewhat more complicated. It's not the old imperialism. There's a new form of imperialism, that doesn't have the clean geography of the colonists there, and the colonised here. It's more complicated.

It's not the old imperialism.

And I also think that, for the first time, significant populations in the global north find themselves in the situation of populations in the old periphery. That is, more and more of the working class of Europe and north America and indeed, the governments of the poor countries of Europe, the old colonial masters, the Portuguese, my God – they are reduced to poverty and being dependent member states of the European Union, having to do whatever the TROIKA (International Monetary Fund, European Commission, and European Central Bank) tell them. These were the former masters of the world.

So they are experiencing a kind of peripheralisation within the core. And a kind of dependency, to use the word that Latin American theorists developed to talk about these relationships. Now it's the poor countries of Europe who are experiencing this dependency, in this very powerful way, and that does open possibilities for a transnational discussion, where people in the global north see that they may have more in common with Latin America and some African peoples and working classes than they do with the financial elites.

RH & FN: How can we explain this from dependency theory?

NF: Dependency theory dealt with trying to think about how newly independent Latin American states could develop even in a context of dependency on at least the European, north American capitalist core. I think that countries like Spain, Portugal, obviously Greece, are the new dependent states today. They don't have sovereignty, they can't set their own policies. The banks and the bond markets tell them what they can do, what they cannot do.

So that's a form of neo-imperialist dependency, not formal colonisation. So in other words, the formal powers of the European core are now in a situation that an earlier generation of Latin American left-wing theorists thought was their situation.

We speak in the US and elsewhere of a steep rise in the number of hours per household that are put to work, to support more or less, the same standard of living. So you have the two-earner family, that's the new model, with many working class people working five jobs rushing to the next, just to have enough money. And they are having to take out consumer loans.

So that is a kind of *déclassement* if you like, and it means that the various kinds of coping strategies take place within the informal economy – strategies that have long been familiar in Latin America, and are starting to reappear in our society. Previously among poor African Americans and immigrants, they are becoming increasingly the norm across the much broader population.

So yes, that is a convergence, you might say, in the sense of what Marxists used to call the labour aristocracy of the colonisers: the colonisers are collapsing, and the conditions of working class people in the global north are converging with the conditions of the global south.

So again, maybe this is a situation that opens more possibilities for cross-continental, transnational social movements, anti-capitalist, anti-systemic movements. Maybe.

It also leads to xenophobic, anti-immigrant right winged populisms: 'they're taking our jobs, keep them out', you know, that kind of stuff. So it's not an automatic conclusion, that you get a positive political response. You can get an ugly negative response too. But there is a certain convergence in our living situations, and if the left can develop a response to that, then we might have some options.

RH & FN: In this sense, how can we put horizontality into perspective, within the social movements that seek autonomy?

NF: Horizontality is a challenge for social organizations because it suggests a practice of politicization from below: grassroots work of a base community where one is dealing with intersecting forms of domination and oppression, within communities of struggle, and trying to avoid hierarchy. But I'm really raising the question of the autonomy dimension of this.

I'm not sure that there really is an outside. And so there is a fundamental political question, about whether you confront the power directly or whether you try to delink from it. Or, whether you can do both at once. So these are some fundamental questions about the autonomy strategy. There is an ambiguity as to whether it is an anti-systemic, counter-systemic project or whether it's a coping strategy.

And I think that if Europeans are facing these questions now, people in Latin America have faced these questions earlier. And if so, Europeans will have a lot to learn from them about how to manage that great difficulty.

RH & FN: Let's talk about the intergenerational replacement occurring with the Mexican movement #YoSoy132. Or the case of the Chilean student movement for education, or the Podemos political party in Spain, or the Passe Livre in Brazil. When intellectual exercise jumps into power, it allows the paradox of becoming another form of ideological institutionalization.

NF: I think that this is more true in the global north of America and western Europe, but I'd say that we've been through a period in which a great deal of protests have been anti- and extra-institutional, for instance, all of the occupations of the public sphere (Occupy Wall Street, the Indignados, and so on and so forth). These have been large, popular movements with cross-class participation. Still, the dominant ethos in many of these movements is a kind of quasi-anarchist thinking that has been largely anti-organisational, anti-institutional and non- or anti-programmatic.

There has been a reluctance to try to propose large-scale, programmatic thinking projects and a reluctance to have any integrative organisation.

On the other hand, I am very interested in a positive way in Podemos as an attempt, without joining the established, political parties, to move from the terrain of civil society towards political power. This is a positive step in principle. Whether Podemos will succeed is another question. It's entirely likely that they won't. I hope they do. We do have examples of left parties that began as civil society movements that tried to make the transition to the political sphere and were instrumentalised and recuperated like the German Green Party, which is a negative example...

But to stay entirely in civil society, in the form of dispersed, fragmented, multiple oppositional movements, to avoid taking what the Gramscian mind set would call a genuine counter-hegemonic stand, with an alternative, with some way of uniting people across all these differences...to stay in this dispersed civil society mode is not adequate either. So the real difficulty is to find something that is neither official politics nor wholly civil society, but that begins to cumulate into counter-hegemonic work.

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We haven't found it yet.

Now, in terms of the #YoSoy132 movement, or #BlackLivesMatter, which is the US equivalent to other anti-violence campaigns, I think these are important civil society movements for making visible police violence and extra-state violence, as in Mexico - very similar to the Arab Spring, where the movement began with a man who was beaten and killed, and how that began the movement in Tahrir Square in Egypt. These are all very important, and they mobilise lives and that's great. But we still have these questions about trying to stay out of the political system, being a problem, being too far into it, being a problem...

So is autonomy another way of coping, or is it a real confrontation of power?

RH & FN: Is this a battle for hegemony, or for recognition in the global economy?

NF: My understanding is that this tremendous development of social movements in Latin America over the last 30 years has a dual phase. Both the autonomy and horizontality phase, but also the more normal, political phase that gives rise to the so-called pink tides...all of the left-wing governments, from Chávez to Lula, you know, Kirchner and so on. So, my understanding is that the background for the political successes - these are all important political successes - was the high level of world commodity prices which meant that there was very significant revenue available for redistribution.

What may not have happened as much, certainly in Venezuela, was actual, economic reform. The money was spent on redistribution, which is of course, great, you're poor. But what it means is that now commodity prices are dropping, the revenue is going to be less. You cannot continue that strategy of quasi-clientelistic redistribution, and if you haven't used the moment to reform the economy in such a way as to create your own sources of ongoing means and wealth, then it's not clear what is going to happen in Latin America. Already, I'm already following closely the problems of Michelle Bachelet, in Chile, and Dilma in Brazil...the right is mobilising. It's a positive example in many ways, but it's not something that can simply be followed, it may be running up against its own limits.

What would the lesson be for Europe? Something more radical is needed.

A lot of your questions are focused on social movement innovation, but I'm linking this to political transformation. And in a certain way, I often cite Latin America as a much more advanced continent than Europe or north America or anywhere else because of this link between social movements and the political. And yet, I'm also saying it's unclear where this link will lead to.

RH & FN: Are these forms of resistance seeking recognition, or are they new forms of economic hegemony?

NF: We don't know where they will lead us to, but we know some of the traps and the dangers that one needs to try to avoid. I want to see an increased counter-hegemonisation of social struggle. That

is, I believe that what is required is some very deep structural transformation of the world capitalist system, of the global financial institutions, and the role of the central banks.

So to me, these conditions, which are very powerful, they set the parameters within the world system, as to what possibilities are, and they are highly oppressive and limiting and destructive of the living conditions and social life of billions and billions of people around the world. So for me, apart from the important local, national and regional struggles, it's very important to confront this global structure which is so consequential in determining whether or not people live or die – that's why it's important that these various actions, which are very promising, cumulate, come together, develop a greater coherence, some greater programmatic orientation.

RH & FN: Can you explain the notion of sick democracy?

NF: The crisis of democracy. I was mainly concerned with the question of how public power is organized in a capitalist society, and I believe that public power is essential, to capital accumulation, and capitalists themselves need it to be sufficiently robust and effective and legitimate, you know, in order to supply the various background conditions that they need. But my claim is that there is a tendency in the normal course of capitalist accumulation to destabilise or sometimes, invade or erode the various forms of public power on which capital depends. And I think that we are at a crisis point, right now in that process, thanks to the rise of what I call a financialised regime of capital accumulation.

We are at a crisis point

This has to do with the new role of central banks and global financial institutions, which increasingly set the ground rules that govern the major, social relations of present day society, including relations between states and their citizens, which are now supervised by or are subject to what the bond markets say, or what the Central Bank says, what the IMF or the World Trade Organization, or World Bank say. These are increasingly a sort of layer of power that operates even above states and constrains what kinds of policies states can do.

We followed very closely in the United States the stand of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in refusing to pay the bondholder, the holdout creditors. She was trying to take use of power of a specific state to deny the power of the US bankruptcy courts and other layers of financial power. That's an interesting struggle, very important, very symptomatic.

So, the point is, increasingly, even if you have states that claim or would like to be genuinely responsive to their citizens (which is not always the case, obviously), even in the best case scenario, such states increasingly lack the capacity to implement policies that their own citizens might demand of them, or might look for. That's one aspect of the crisis of democracy.

The other aspect is the existence of problems on a global scale that states cannot deal with, like global warming, climate change. This requires global public power, and we don't have any democratic, global power. We have semi-private powers that operate on behalf of investors, not on behalf of the public.

RH & FN: Are we talking about accountability?

FN: Yes! There is no accountability of these global institutions. That's also an element of the crisis of democracy. There are so many examples, we can talk about corruption, we could talk about the retrenching of social spending and social and public provision, the marketization and commodification of what used to be many public functions. So these are all cases in which there is a general weakening or hollowing out of public power, and that's part of the crisis of democracy.

P.S.

* “The battle for neoliberal hegemony: an interview”. Open Democracy, 19 January 2016:
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/roque-urbieto-herandez-fabiola-navarro-nancy-fraser/battle-for-neoliberal-hegemony>

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