



## Nancy Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born* (Verso, 2019), 64 pages

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In response to the growing global, political crisis, we welcome a new text from Nancy Fraser, Professor of Philosophy and Politics at the New School for Social Research, critical theorist, and philosopher. Fraser's text dons a line from Antonia Gramsci for its title: *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born* and may act as a "guiding star" out of disaster.<sup>1</sup> This piece explores the catastrophic breakdown of trust in political systems worldwide in order to sketch a more hopeful possibility coming out of the US presidential election. As a short text (64 pages) consisting of an essay (previously titled *From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump – and Beyond* published in *American Affairs* I, no. 4, Winter 2017) and an interview, Fraser moves from critical theoretical analysis to identifying promising political potential thanks to her masterful conceptual use of the concept of hegemony, "the process by which a ruling class makes its domination appear natural by installing the presuppositions of its own worldview as the common sense of society as a whole," which she takes exclusively from Gramsci.<sup>2</sup> Paired with her unwavering desire to hope for better things to come, Fraser rallies for a counterhegemonic bloc built on radical social and structural transformation and, perhaps most strikingly, shows that conceiving something new requires the courage to face our shared sociality.

Before opening the book, the title *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born* situates us at a dangerous impasse: impending death and refusal of new birth. As the United States teeters on unstable grounds of both progressive and reactionary neoliberalism, Fraser is adamant that our

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2019), 40.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, 13.

global, political crisis cannot continue to be born. Like much of Fraser's work, she is not here to offer palatable, side-line commentary on our political, economic, ecological, and social woes. Rather, we should be grateful to her as she takes on the arduous task of not only identifying and characterizing the crisis, but of plotting possibilities out of the initial impasse suggested by the title. For it is only by first examining the contributing factors that we are able to understand that which cannot be born. This initial analysis is an organizational and narrative necessity if Fraser is to lead us to envision a way out of crisis.

Drawing on examples like Brexit, mass incarceration, consumer debt, and the rise of authoritarian forces, Fraser shows us a crisis that is not only political but also economic and social.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, by placing Donald Trump's election and US presidency at the center of her investigation she is able to characterize the heart of calamity as the crisis of hegemony and neoliberalism – "ideology and policy that emphasizes free market competition as the most efficient allocation of resources."<sup>4</sup> But due to the length of the text, half of which is devoted to a separate interview with founding editor and publisher of *Jacobin* – Bhaskar Sunkara, Fraser knows she must make her case in a series of sketches. To wit, within the first five pages, she lays out the global political crisis, names Trump as the poster child, defines Gramsci's hegemonic bloc, and adds her own ideas of distribution (how society should allocate divisible goods) and recognition (how society should allocate respect and esteem) to the investigation. Though this jumpstart may sound hasty, I remain impressed by her concise – yet thorough – unpacking of both history and ideology which is less like a frustrated hand-holding and more like a much welcomed catch-up.

Her talent for writing about urgent situations without a tone of panic sustains the reader through the text and showcases her as both a critical theorist and an educator. That is to say, although the content may feel initially intimidating to the unversed, but eager, newcomer, she is able to cover large swaths of history and political theory without ostracizing us. As she guides us along, one of the true gems of the length of the book is that it is not a treasure hunt. From the beginning, Fraser lays out her thesis as well as her proposal for a counterhegemonic bloc by stating, "We can say that what made Trump and Trumpism possible was the break-up of a previous hegemonic bloc [...]. By parsing the construction and breakup of that nexus, we can clarify not only Trumpism but also the prospects after Trump for a counterhegemonic bloc that could resolve

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<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Nicola Smith, "Neoliberalism", *Encyclopaedia Britannica (Encyclopaedia Britannica, inc., June 28, 2019)* <https://www.britannica.com/topic/neoliberalism>.

the crisis.”<sup>5</sup> In what follows, Fraser illustrates a counterhegemonic bloc that has the potential for revolutionary stability as it grounds itself in the shared needs of the working class.

As the first section comes to a close, we are not only impressed by the sketch of such a strategy, but Fraser’s investigation has put forth language that is both situated in our current social and political location and cast toward the future. This makes the text not just relevant, but tangibly grounded in the 2020 United States in a way others have not yet been able to do. It is here that Fraser leaves behind her formal investigation essay and enters into conversation with *Jacobin* publisher Bhaskar Sunkara in an interview titled *The Populist Cat is Out of the Bag*. If we characterize this text as a type of political broadsheet, the inclusion of an interview is not so strange a move. Instead, it acts not only as a tonal reprieve from the quick-paced first half, but also as an opportunity for Fraser to continue unfolding ideas both related to the first section and to her work more broadly.

To be clear, this section is not simply tacked-on as a bit of filler because there was nothing more to say. In fact, it can be argued that Fraser leaves much unsaid about concrete dismantling and reorganization strategies as well as the horrors around the corner if her counterhegemonic bloc never formulates. Alas, it seems the interview tries to account for a few of these unanswered questions as well as widen our scope toward a larger critique of the hegemonic bloc that is progressivism and neoliberalism.

Thus, it can be said that the interview acts as an extension with a new voice. Fraser speaks candidly and her expertise shows itself as an all-encompassing way of being. Writing about progressive neoliberalism is not a hot, new topic for her. She mentions that in the nineties she was grappling with these ideas but did not have the most fitting language until the 2016 US election. It was here that she was able to articulate that, “neoliberalism is not a total worldview [...] but in fact it is a political-economic project that can articulate with several different and even competing projects of recognition – including progressive ones.”<sup>6</sup> Such a realization gives a different tenor to the previous essay as it highlights the slow, yet glaringly apparent, rise and instability of this phenomenon.

There are also moments when we see ourselves in Sunkara as he asks many questions that were just beneath the surface of the first half of the text such as: “What would you say to critics who emphasize the stability of the system as a whole? Today neoliberal capitalism governs virtually the entire world,” and “[...] because of structural forces or political opposition, what if those of us on the progressive side are unable to make

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<sup>5</sup> Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born*, 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, 48.

good on our promises? Could that make for an even worse outcome than Obama-style politics?"<sup>7</sup> In her responses, Fraser provides nuance – such as distinguishing between neoliberal policy and neoliberal hegemony – while acknowledging that her ideas for a counterhegemonic bloc have yet to be realized. As the interview unfolds, we gain an even larger historical horizon on which to situate the crisis, and though this helps contextualize her argument, it also means the future is uncharted and uncertain. In this way we come to a deeper appreciation of Fraser's proposal for a new way forward: "If we can reimagine the working class in this way [as intersectional and encompassing paid and unpaid occupations, immigrants, women, people of color, etc.], we can also understand it as having the capacity to become the leading force in a bloc that also includes youth, large segments of the middle class, and segments of the professional-managerial class who can be split off from the neoliberals. That would be a powerful new alliance, with the potential to become a new hegemonic bloc." This passage comes as a comfort to the reader as the new hegemonic bloc is both grounded in history and reimagined as something more inclusive, hopeful, and unprecedented.

Anticipating future readership, Fraser's text is one that is fit for both inside and outside of the classroom. For undergraduate students, a slow, guided reading of this text may give them language to identify and characterize the global, political crisis. For graduate students, this text may offer a more sophisticated understanding of hegemony and neoliberalism as well as confidence to articulate more promising possibilities after Trump. For all readers, this text shows that a new way forward is not only desirable, but is imaginable and feasible. As we begin to formalize and organize toward the counterhegemonic bloc, I, like Fraser, believe we can navigate our way out of crisis and into a better future.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, 66.