



Nancy Fraser, Marina Liakova

"Emancipation is not an all or nothing affair"

Interview with Nancy Fraser

Feminist critical theorist Nancy Fraser outlines in interview her concept of "parity of participation", or the representation of women in institutional structures. The concept, she argues, bridged the traditional leftwing theoretical dichotomy between distribution and recognition and in turn raises the question: who determines who is to be represented? Here Fraser emphasizes the centrality of the politics of interpretation in any dialogue about justice, such as that between western feminism and Islam.

Marina Liakova: An important theme in your writing is the concept of justice. You argue that the main problem of justice is recognition and protection of identities from cultural domination. Could you give a brief definition of justice — does it represent only a lack of domination? And taking this further, is the struggle of modern women for recognition successful and what other accents could you pinpoint?

Nancy Fraser: My own particular view of justice is a highly demanding view. My idea is that the justice requires social arrangements that permit all members to participate in social interaction on a par with one another. So that means they must be able to participate as peers in all the major forms of social interaction: whether it's politics, whether it's the labour market, whether it's family life and so on. And parity of participation is quite demanding. It is not enough that there be simply the absence of legal discrimination; it means that you have all the effective conditions for really being able to participate. So I guess it depends on how you define "domination". If you treat "domination" as the existence of systemic institutionalized obstacles of participation, that would mean that justice requires the overcoming of those obstacles. If you define "domination" in some more minimal way, it would require more than that. That's really a matter of definition. But the most important thing for me is that there should be no institutionalized obstacles that prevent anyone from being a full participant in social life.

Is the struggle of modern women for recognition successful? If you accept my definition of justice then the next thing you have to do is ask about what kinds of things can function as obstacles to parity of participation. And this is where the idea of recognition comes in. With respect to gender in particular, modern societies, probably all known societies, have institutionalized a status hierarchy between men and women in which there are clausal norms that value traits associated with "men" or "masculinity" above traits associated with "women" or "femininity". And because these are norms that are not just in people's head but actually institutionalized in a social arrangements, the result is that women are impeded or blocked from full participation on the same terms with men.

For example, women cannot today participate in the labour market on the same terms with men because of care work responsibility: whether it's child care or older care or other forms of household responsibilities. That is a result of a norm — that this is somehow feminine, that it is women's work that would emasculate a man to do. So that is an institutionalized norm that has a real material effect that blocks women's capacity to participate fully on equal terms with men in the labour market, in political life, and in civil society. But you could also say — and this is interconnected — that women are also blocked from full participation by lack of resources. We know that the poverty rate is higher for women than for men in almost all societies, largely because when men work, it is the woman who has to raise and support children. So we have what we call "female headed family", meaning a woman who is paid less than men and has to support children and so on. That is an issue of distribution not recognition. But they are connected. Together, these forms of distributive inequality and this force of misrecognition or status hierarchy work to make women's full equal participation difficult or impossible.

ML: In your study *Unruly practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* you write about discursive power and argue that the right to define the needs of a social group itself represents power. Isn't the struggle for recognition indeed a struggle for interpretation and naming, and consequently, a struggle for power? How can we define who is the legitimate subject of power in modern societies? Who has the right to define the social situation of "others"?

NF: When I first started to think about this question of interpreting needs, I was arguing against a purely distributive view of issues of poverty and social welfare. Twenty or so years ago, at least in the Anglo–American tradition of analytic thought, everyone was focused exclusively on distribution, which was largely understood in an acultural, economistic fashion. I was dissatisfied with that way of thinking about this problem and convinced, as you note, that the issue is not just simply that the needs of poor or disadvantaged people in modern society should be satisfied, but also who gets to define what these needs are. This was a time when there was a New Left critique of paternalism and the bureaucratic nature of the welfare state. I was, you know, expressing in part that New Left critique that people should have the right and the ability to themselves participate in interpreting and defining their needs. And that we need to think about policy of distribution as being absolutely connected with this politics of interpretation.

So I was trying in a way to introduce the discursive or cultural turn, not as something separate from the distributive model, but to show how they were interconnected. One couldn't think well about the distributive model if one didn't bring in the question of interpretation, culture and, you are right, "power". Because there is absolutely a question of discursive power, of whose interpretation on what the problem is carries weight, whose interpretation of needs is authorized, and whose is just pushed aside, marginal, and ignored completely. So the struggle over welfare or distribution, as I understood it, had to be connected with the struggle for discursive power. I thought of all the various disadvantaged groups — women, the poor, workers, blacks or various ethnic minorities — as needing to organize themselves as collective subjects with the power to solve their own problems.

Now having said that, I don't believe in a kind of monopolistic view that the group in question has the last word and the others can say nothing. It is not that everyone defines their own problems — that would be a monologic view. I

believe in a dialogic view. So I do think that when we are talking about issues of gender this is about a conversation between men and women, or if you prefer a contestation. But it is a dialogue of some kind about what are legitimate gender norms. And I don't believe that women have a monopoly on that. But what I do insist on is that this dialogue, or struggle, or conversation has to proceed on fair terms. So the question is how to empower those who occupy a disadvantaged position, to amplify or strengthen their voice in these contestations and dialogues.

ML: In your writings you claim that recognition should be combined with redistribution. Who is this message addressed to? Is it possible to distinguish between processes of recognition and redistribution, and how?

NF: Who is this message addressed to? At one level, I think it was addressed simultaneously to two different groups that represented two tendencies on the Left, shall we say. I think of these as the social Left, on the one side, and the cultural Left, on the other. Of course I am a philosopher and I am writing in a somewhat academic and tactical way; I don't necessarily think I'm writing for a mass audience but for intellectuals and academics who represented one of the two currents on the Left, and perhaps just reflective Left intellectuals in general. My idea was that there was an unnecessary and counterproductive clash or polarization between these two currents on the Left, who should have been working together. The idea was that we had a long standing socialist, or social democratic, or labour oriented tradition on the Left that thought about justice in distributive terms and that was either ignorant of or in some cases hostile to the politics of identity, difference, multiculturalism and all of that. They wanted everyone to have an overarching national or class solidarity in which they denied the differences because they fought for economic equality.

And then there was a later tradition that grew out of the New Left, what we call "the new social movements" including feminism, multiculturalism, anti-racist and gay and lesbian movements. And these were movements that instead were emphasizing questions of identity and difference — we call it the cultural turn. There was a tense period in the 1980s and 1990s in which these two currents of the Left were fighting against each other. The multiculturalists were saying "you are old fashioned, economic, vulgar Marxist, you are passé", and so on. And the social democrats were saying: "You are Balkanizing, you are putting off progressive forces by emphasizing the identity and difference, these are not real issues of justice", and so on. And I have the intuition that this whole idea that there was an either-or choice was completely wrongheaded and unhelpful, and that there were obstacles to justice to a participation of both kinds: obstacles of distribution and obstacles of misrecognition. So any adequate progressive movement of the Left had to integrate the politics of recognition with the politics of redistribution. My original idea was to sort of address these two currents of the Left and say: "You have to get together".

So I would reply to the second part of your question by saying that a part of the problem is that in real life, distribution and recognition are intertwined. I just gave the example of the struggle over the interpretation of needs. It looks at first glance that when we are talking about "poverty programs" we are talking about "distribution". But the second you think a little more about that and you get into the question of who interprets needs and so on, you will see that there are recognition issues involved. The real life issues not always but very often have elements of both. So for me recognition vs. distribution is an analytical distinction. The real question when you analyze social reality is to figure out how they are intertwined, and which in a given case is the dominant element,

because it is not always that they are equally intertwined. It could be that there is a distributive subtext of a recognition issue or a recognition subtext of a distributive issue. My idea was that we should adopt what I call a "bifocal perspective", that is look at every issue through the two lenses.

ML: Could you tell me in this context something more about representation?

NF: This is a later development in my thought. For about ten years I was working with this two-dimensional model of justice — recognition and distribution. And often people asked me: "Ok, you've got culture, you've got economy, but where is the politics? Don't we need a political dimension?" And I said — oh, no, this is all political; these are all issues of power, domination and so on, so you don't need a separate political dimension. And for a long time I worried about whether that was an adequate answer, because of course a political scientist will tell you that in addition to economic obstacles to participation on the one side, and cultural or status hierarchy obstacles on the other, the decision rules in the political community matter. Do you have proportional representation vs. winner take all, a parliamentary system vs. presidential system, electoral quotas for women, for example. I mean it matters that in theory you could have fair distribution and reciprocal recognition but if you have bad decision rules in the political system you might still end up with structural obstacles to full participation. I was aware of this argument but eventually was convinced that I was right and that the problem is: What are the kinds of obstacles to participation? In other words, the idea that there is a third kind of obstacle. However, to introduce the third dimension of representation was not the question about decision rules within the political community but what I call the metapolitical level, that is the question of frame.

I have been talking here so far about parity of participation. But one immediately has to ask: Parity of participation among whom? Who counts? If we take for granted that the ones to count are the citizens within one territorial state, then we have not interrogated in a critical way this whole question of the division between states. All these questions of trans-border injustices will disappear if we don't raise that question explicitly. For me to introduce the third political dimension of representation makes it possible to raise issues at two levels: Are the relations of representation fair? Should there be multicultural rights, gender quotas, public campaign financing proportional representation, and so on? But I also want to raise these questions at the metapolitical level, about whether there are problems of justice that should be talked about not within the bounded territorial community of the modern state but that are transnational or global. If so, then we have the whole problem of a special kind of political injustice of misrepresentation, which I would call metapolitical misrepresentation or misframing — where we are using the wrong frame, excluding some people altogether.

ML: Are women today emancipated?

NF: I think we have to first of all deconstruct the question a little: which women, where. Emancipation is not an "all and nothing" affair; there are degrees of emancipation and I think that there are many contexts in which we can say that women's position, women's status, women's ability to participate fully in the social life have improved. But it could also be the case that some women's ability to participate has actually worsened. Speaking from the US or maybe western European perspective, since the 1970s there has been a significant cultural change: people are much more aware of gender injustice, there are certain kinds of speech about women that are no longer tolerated in

public society. There is a level of awareness that this is a question of justice which before was not even a question of justice. That is a certain kind of progress. What has been more difficult was to institutionalize this new awareness in society in practice. In the US, women still earn something like seventy cents for every dollar that men earn. So there remain a significant gender wage-gap or pay-gap at the level of distribution. Many forms of legal discrimination have now become illegal, but there are a lot of gender disadvantages that are not of the level of law, and so in practice many problems remain.

I wonder myself about the situation of women in a former communist country, since I am told that under communism women were accepted as workers but still had to do all the housework. On the other hand, there were gender reproductive rights (maybe Romania is an exception), some child care — things that we didn't have so much in the US. I understand also that you had a complicated situation in political representation, in which you have the high numbers of women with very little power. I would guess that today the number of women in parliament is much lower but maybe they have a little more power. I understand that some social welfare benefits have been lost and that this makes it harder; I don't know whether women's taste for participation has dropped, which would be problematic in a way. What would *you* say, is the situation of women better? I guess we have to talk about which women: professional women — maybe yes; poor women — probably not.

ML: Let me give you an example. In the mid-twentieth century, a "violent" emancipation of sorts took place in the socialist societies of eastern Europe. According to socialist ideology, women were equal to men. Following this official political definition, eastern European women were integrated into working life and the workplace. This didn't overturn the patriarchal definition of women as responsible for taking care of the home. Eastern European women worked full time, climbed the social hierarchy, and at the same time were solely responsible for taking care of the home, receiving only partial support from their husbands. In these societies, the "private" remained a sphere of latent power. However, is it possible to talk at all about individual autonomy when individuals are left with no private spaces of power away from and closed to the public eye?

NF: It seems to me that there are two senses of privacy here which we could distinguish. First, there is the private in the sense of work: of unwaged work in the household and in the family. And there I think is the idea that there needs to be a fair distribution of this work between men and women. And then there is an interesting question of whether some of the work should be socialized: whether you have state-provided child care or whether it is all in the home. Either way, if you want fair distribution between men and women, it is completely unjust that women do almost all of it. That is a different kind of privacy from the idea that people, the individuals to be autonomous, need to have private spaces that are not under state surveillance. And that is obviously very important.

I know that in communism it was a very important demand and I gathered that there were some contexts in which people valorized family life as the place that was not under direct surveillance. In the work world, on the other hand, you were watched and had to be very careful. So there were valorizations of the private in this sense, and that is a very important idea. You were able to form things that were publicly visible but not subject to state control or state power. In the same way, feminists argued — and I think it is very important

— that the family should not be a sphere in which justice does not apply. So if there is domestic violence, then this is something that should be a public issue and not just a private thing. I think that what we want in the end is a sharing of work that is now private; we want justice in the private sphere, we want the removal of authoritarian state surveillance in the public sphere. And then, maybe, behind all of this is some idea that the line between what is private and what is public is subject to democratic reflection.

ML: In the era of globalization, a lot of feminist studies presumes that women and men are the same all over the world. Do women everywhere have common problems? Does the concept that women globally share the same problems stem from the western intellectual colonization of culture, science and politics — assigning western issues to societies and cultures where they're not inherent?

NF: I think that it depends on how concrete you are. If you want to speak in the most abstract terms, then you can say that women everywhere have problems of unequal power in the household, of questions about reproductive freedom, of economic disadvantage. If you think about these things in a very abstract way, they are quite alike. But the second you get into the question of the power of interpretation, what exactly is the form it takes and what it means, then you are instantly come up against some very significant differences. Because of this wave of feminism, which originated in North America and western Europe, you got definitions and interpretations of women's problems that actually reflected only the experience of North American and western European women. And even there, by the way, there would be a bias in favour of, you know, white, European, non immigrant women, heterosexual, middle class women. Because even there the voices of the poor women, of black women, of lesbian women were not fully heard.

When feminism began to go international and transnational, when it encountered the communist world, the post-communist world and the so-called Third world, all of these problems of the politics of interpretation came back: Who is empowered to define what counts as a women's issue and a women's problem? And you are absolutely right that there was a heavy bias in favour of North American or western European interpretations. I can remember very well in some of the early international conferences on gender, especially Third World women angrily rejected the forms of feminism that were coming from Europe and North America as Western imperialist. There was quite a long, twenty-year period of struggle and difficult, very difficult communication, and I wouldn't say these problems have been entirely overcome. However, I think there is much less disparity, much more balanced communication today. I am not sure about post-communist societies, but when I think about places like India, Latin America, China, Sub-Saharan Africa, I think we are having something closer to an equal conversation of different voices. Maybe there is an exception — I mean there are women in Muslim countries who are feminists, who are in a complicated, very difficult situation both in their own context and in the larger international debate.

I would suspect that in the post-communist world, feminism was associated with communism and bolshevism. Therefore you have the problem of finding legitimate ways to discuss questions of gender power in your own context that are not immediately dismissed as "western imperialist" on the one hand or "communist" on the other. And then you have the problem of how to be in dialogue with the international feminist movement that is not going to have the same problem with interpretation. For example, I remember how the question

of privacy caused a lot of miscommunication and trouble between first world and post-communist women in the feminist movement. I remember very well that our western, or let's say North American and western European feminism, insisted that the personal is political and the private sphere should be politicised. Eastern European women said: "Oh, no, that is exactly what we want to get away from", "the private is the one space, where we did not have to politicize things". There was a miscommunication, but I think in the end people have understood one another and seen that they have inherited different sets of problems, and that gender inequality, that general condition that we share, would work out in different ways in the two different sets.

ML: According to studies conducted amongst Muslim women in Germany, they don't feel discriminated against in situations which would be defined as discriminative in the West (e.g. arranged marriages, domestic violence, etc.). Bearing this in mind, does objective discrimination exist, or can we talk about discrimination only when it is subjectively understood as such?

NF: I have to say that I don't entirely agree that domestic violence is not experienced as discrimination. Maybe "discrimination" is too weak a word and it would be more proper to call it a form of illegitimate power. I think that Muslim women do experience domestic violence as an illegitimate power. But you are right about cases like "arranged marriages", like increasingly the question of the veil or the headscarf and other forms of so called modesty that are compulsory for women in the orthodox Muslim context. I would not say "all Muslim women", I would say that there is a split among women from Muslim background between those who embrace this Muslim custom and those who criticize and reject it. I think that both exist in the Muslim community and that is not only in majority-Muslim countries but also among the immigrant communities in the European countries. So they are in a situation of their own struggle over the interpretation of these practices. And there is no agreement among them.

So then the question is, as you say: Should we have an objective idea or does it depend? Well, I want to say somehow both are right and we have to figure out what it means to say that both are right. If we start with an idea of parity of participation, I think there is an objective question as to whether or not social arrangements allow women to participate fully or not. That is the kind of question that there should be an objective answer to, and so even if women or some women don't see it that way they could be wrong: it could be that social arrangements do not allow them to participate on a par with men, even if they think they do. This is the objective side. However, these questions about what parity is and what it means in a given context are not exactly to explore the actual question; they too are subject to interpretation. So even here it is not like we have social science experts to have the last word. Social science knowledge is relevant and that should be part of the public debate. But it is not the final authority that obviates the need for democratic discourse or conversation, interpretation, deliberation about these things. Once again, that brings exactly the same problem about ensuring that the different voices can exchange on a par, that the terms of the dialogue are fair. We come around into a circle. We want these things to be matters of interpretation but the interpretation has to be fair and for the interpretation to be fair everyone has to have equal capacities to participate on a par. And I think there is no way out of this circle. It is not a theoretically problematic circle though maybe this circle is difficult in practice. So I am trying to say that there is an objective pole and a more subjective pole and they are related in some particular way.

ML: Recently the German MP Lale Akgün appealed to German Muslim women to stop wearing headscarves. What do you make of this? Does wearing a headscarf imply obedience to men? Could an emancipated woman cover her head because of her religious beliefs?

NF: Well, this is exactly the issue. I think it is fine for the German MP to make this appeal, I think it is fine for others to say "no" and to have a real discussion about what this means and that is what we should be discussing. I would say that no practice has an unambiguous definitive meaning that is given once and for all. I think the meaning of these practices can change. It could be that the original meaning was not patriarchal in the time of Mohammed, for his time he may have had rather egalitarian views about women, it could be that later they took on a more patriarchal meaning as Muslim societies became more authoritarian. It could be now that for Muslim immigrants in western European countries, wearing the scarf is less a statement about gender relations than a statement about intercultural relations, an assertion of pride and an insistence that they refuse any assimilation but want to be engaged in a struggle of recognition with the German majority. So it maybe is less about men and women than about these other things. The meaning of the scarf can take on a different meaning in different contexts. Of course, it could have more than one meaning at the same time. It could have both a gender dimension and that recognition dimension. I would say that in principle there is no reason why an emancipated woman could not cover her head. In principle. In a certain context. Whether that is the context today, I don't know.

ML: Is it an individual decision?

NF: Well, yes and no. I would certainly be against any use of state collusion to compel women to wear a scarf when they don't want to or to prohibit them to wear one if they do want to. I would be against that. So you could say yes, in that case it is an individual decision. But what I have been saying here is that there is also this dimension of the power of interpretation. Individuals don't completely control the meaning. There are larger social forces that construct the meaning; you can think you are being free and making your choice but it could end up meaning something else in the larger context. So I think there is no escape from engaging in the politics of interpretation as a collective project. But yes, as I said, I would defend any individual right to make the decision either way. But that is another level. I would also emphasize the importance of the struggle to change the meaning of the symbol, if it is a patriarchal symbol, and that is a part of the collective politics of recognition.

ML: Over ten years ago you called for the development of "an eclectic, neo-pragmatic feminist theory". Has your appeal been answered?

NF: That is hard to say. Maybe it did in the sense that I think there is a context in feminist theory that is quite pluralistic. I feel that there is less of this head on exclusionary fighting between, say, poststructuralist feminists and critical theory feminists, or liberal feminists vs. radical feminists. I think that the culture of feminist intellectual life has become more participial to difference, letting many flowers bloom as we say, but I would say that at the same time I still feel the need for some integrative vision. I would like a way of integrating the strong points of these different paradigms into some sort of a larger vision. I would not want to insist that everyone has to share that vision of course — a lot of my work has been being about integrating different currents of theory within feminism and also integrating feminism with other trends of progressive thought that are oriented to questions of race or colonialism. Not everything is

just "gender". I want to integrate feminism with other things.

ML: In your articles you called for an integration of feminist theoretical approaches. Is it still on the agenda? Or are we witnessing, in your words, "a Balkanization" of the theoretical field?

NF: As I said, I saw that there is a need for integration. Maybe "Balkanization" is not the right word. I realize that could be an offensive word to people who live in the Balkans and I don't want to offend anyone. I would say this: that feminist intellectual life has become significantly institutionalized in some places in the US. It's not adequate, but it's become large, it has its own specialization, different disciplines: you have feminists lawyers, and feminists scientists, and feminists economists — and they are all working in their specialized area and this is just a part of the normal academic culture of specialization. And so I think, on the one hand, that this is a sign of progress, that feminism has become an accepted, normal kind of intellectual enterprise. On the other hand, there is a loss because this specialization is problematic. The real questions within the field of gender and in many other fields cannot be answered by one discipline. So there is an absolute need for the integration of different disciplinary perspectives and we are having trouble I think with that in the US.

ML: Is a "Third Way" possible between critical theory and post-structuralism? To what extent does your view correspond with Pierre Bourdieu's approach?

NF: That is a very interesting question. I would put the question of the "Third Way" slightly differently. I would say I think that what we need is some paradigm for theorizing that integrates some of the insights and concepts and strengths of post-structuralism with some of the insights, concepts and strengths of critical theory. I think that this is possible and there is probably more than one way to do it, but I feel that each of these paradigms has strengths. The strength of post-structuralism is its very sophisticated way of dealing with discursive constructions of social phenomena. And there are so many interesting ideas — whether we are talking about Foucauldian notion of subjectivization or whether we are talking about Derridean deconstructive notion of supplement and so on — these are very fruitful interesting ideas and they tend to have an institutional deficit. They are situated not only in relation to social institutions, they sometimes treat these processes of meaning as if they are precluded. Critical theory has strength in dealing with institutions but not such a good strength in dealing with a sort of cultural interpretation. There is no reason why these two could not work together.

And Bourdieu, I think he is a very important thinker and I think there are definitely some affinities between Bourdieu's thought and my own. I don't use the language of the "capital", but he has the idea that there is symbolic capital and economic capital. This sounds a little bit like my idea of the distributive dimension of power or injustice and the recognition dimension. So I think there is something similar. He is very clear that struggle over status and struggle over distribution are connected, so I think we share that. I think we also share the idea that social life in modern societies takes place in different fields. He would say this field of struggle and that field of struggle and I would say this arena of participation and that arena of participation. So I think that is something in common. What I like less about Bourdieu is that sometimes he tends to be too reductive, he treats too much of social life as strategic and tends to have a reductive view of normative dimension. And he is also too focused

on the way that hierarchy and inequality always reproduces itself. I think that we have to be more open to contradictions and revolutions that don't simply reproduce the previous pattern but change it.

ML: Is it possible to produce "feminist counter-hegemony" to "male power"? How necessary is it and how successful have we been in achieving it?

NF: Yes, I think that there has been a feminist counter-hegemony at the level of interpretation of masculinity, femininity, gender, family life, and so forth. I think that feminists have succeeded in moving from a situation of real marginality, where everyone thought we were crazy to raise these questions, to a situation where our views are treated seriously, even if not everyone agrees — it means that there are still struggles over them. I think we have fought our way into becoming a genuine alternative, a genuine force in the struggle. So that is a kind of counter-hegemony. And as I said earlier, I think the difficulty has been in institutionalizing these new meanings that we created at the level of interpretation.

ML: During the 1970s and the 1980s there was a marked increase in the activities of the women's movement in Europe. At the start of the twenty-first century we're witnessing a very different picture. For example, in 2006 the German journalist Eva Herman appealed for a return of women to the home. Is there a tendency towards more conservative attitudes in society amongst contemporary thinkers as well?

NF: This is I think quite complicated. If I start with the US, one of the most important developments in the last twenty years in the US has been the emergence of a politically influential religious right wing, largely evangelical Christians but also some Catholics who have been very influential in Bush government and so on. That is one strain of conservatism. Then there is the hegemony of the so called neo-conservatives, which are not necessarily religious but have their own idea of American spreading democracy by military means in Iraq. That also is a conservative vision. And finally we have got just a straight economic neo-liberal kind of conservatism. So we have at least three powerful strains of conservatism: the religious-cultural conservatism, the neo-conservatism of the Wolfowitz-type and neo-liberalism. And they all came together in this powerful coalition, which is odd because they don't really agree with each other exactly. And maybe now their coalition is coming apart, now that the Iraq war has been such a failure, I'm not sure. But during this period of a conservative hegemony, where the forces of social democracy, multiculturalism and feminism and so on have been on the defence, we definitely had an actual struggle. I would say that academia is one of the only sectors in American society where you have still had a kind of hegemony of the Left. In every other sphere of society there has been a conservative hegemony.

Now I think the conservatives in the US are trying to colonize academia as well and to insist on the legitimacy of Christian religious thinking, which is something new in academia. We could look at the election of Nicolas Sarkozy as the triumph of conservatism in France: he is a complicated mix of several different kinds of conservatism, a racist anti-immigrant version with the neo-liberal economic version. So I think in many countries you do see this upsurge of conservative thinking. Then, of course, we should also talk about, let's say, the decline of leftwing utopian thinking: with the delegitimation of communism and with it of socialism, we don't exactly know anymore what to use for Maeve Cooks' phrase, "the image of the good society is that we want". I

think there is a vacuum of ideas on the Left, whereas the right has a lot of energy and a lot of ideas. Even though I think these are very inadequate and destructive, nevertheless they have energy and we are having a hard time finding alternatives. So I definitely think it is a problematical historical moment. I hope it will change but how long it will take I don't know. Certainly in the US, it was unlucky for Iraq, but lucky for us that the Iraq has become such a failure. That has really hurt the conservatives in the US. So there is a chance in the US now that a centre-left democratic party will come to power and this will be a big improvement for us. I also think that the the struggles against the neoliberalism at the transnational level are very important and a very hopeful sign and I hope that those struggles can expand and grow and develop new ideas.

ML: What are the challenges facing women today?

NF: I think I have said enough when I answered the other question: to institutionalize the gains at the level of consciousness and cultural interpretation; to find ways to unite, let's say, secular feminists with religious feminists; to promote dialogue and understanding transnationally among feminists; to develop creative programmatic ideas of alternatives to the present world order and political system; that's enough. It's plenty.

ML: In debates on post-modernity, it seems that the idea of the moral and civil calling of social scientists is losing importance. In "times of vacuum" it is often difficult to find a starting point for moral arguments. In your opinion, what is the mission of the social scientist today? How do gender studies fit into it?

NF: We are certainly living in a time where social science becomes scientific in the sense of supposedly being value-free, technical and empirical, trying to model itself on the physical sciences; this is a kind of science of ideology, if you will. And in fact, social inquiry can never be entirely value free. It only interprets how the problems are posed, it is saturated with interpretations and value premises that could be contested. So I think we need a much more reflective social science in which the value can be made explicit, or defended or argued about, in which we try to understand the social uses of knowledge and how it can be misused as well as used. So I am in general in favour of a reflective, interpretive kind of social science, which is not to say that I am against quantitative science in general, but insofar as it degenerates in this scientific parody of real science and it becomes problematic. And of course, feminism or gender study as a mode of social inquiry would be a special case of this. I would say gender study is much better than mainstream social science at having an element of reflexivity and awareness of these value commitments and in its attempts to defend them.

ML: Where are the boundaries of tolerance nowadays? Can we be tolerant towards everyone and everybody, and how do we draw the line?

NF: That is a tremendously difficult question. First of all, I think some people would argue that if we are talking in terms of "tolerance" and "toleration", we are still not yet talking in terms of real mutual and reciprocal recognition. The language of toleration suggests that there is one empowered majority that is going to be kind to some disempowered minority, whereas what we really want is a dialogue, mutual recognition among equals. So if we assume that, then we still have the problem not only of dialogue but in some cases taking decisions about how to handle difficult problems. Let's take the problem of

female genital mutilation as an extreme case of a practice that I think should be outlawed, that is not tolerated. Here — insofar as this has a religious meaning or significance — I would think that the tradition can adapt and find other initiation ceremonies, other ways of marking these *rites de passage*. Because the practice of female genital mutilation is so invasive and carries so many health problems and makes it impossible for women to have sexual pleasure that it is an obstacle to parity of participation.

So that is an extreme case of an injustice. And there are other cases that are much more difficult, like the question of the veil. I think that the veil in and of itself is not an obstacle to parity of participation, nor it is an obstacle when the veil is given certain meanings and connected with other things. By itself, it is neutral — what you wear. Everything depends on how it is interpreted and what is done with it. So in that case again, I don't like the language of toleration. But in that case, I would say, let's fight out the battle of interpretation and let the practice be chosen freely. So these are maybe two extremes. What I am basically doing is distinguishing between practices that have a very direct connection to institutionalizing a disparity in participation, and practices where the issue is this kind of interpretive matrix.

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