



**Nancy Fraser, Alfredo Gomez-Muller, Gabriel Rockhill**

## Global justice and the renewal of critical theory

*A dialogue with Nancy Fraser*

Nancy Fraser explains how the shift from redistribution to recognition undertaken by political movements during the 1990s forms part of the "post-socialist condition". The fall of the Soviet Union, she argues, not only brought the end of communism, but also sucked the energy out of most movements with social-egalitarian aspirations. Yet in an era of globalization, the change could also be seen as one of "frame". Campaigners for redistribution are no longer constrained by the borders of the nation-state, and concentrate their efforts increasingly on inequalities between, rather than within, nations. Transnational activism is where Fraser now hopes challenges to the "post-socialist" common sense will emerge.

**Gabriel Rockhill:** A large portion of your project is premised on establishing an account of the contemporary situation in politics and political philosophy. In *Justice Interruptus* (1997), you situate your project in relationship to the "post-socialist condition". Could you explain how your work is informed by and reacts to this "condition"? In your most recent work, you tend to situate your project in relationship to the "global age". How does globalization relate to what you call the "post-socialist condition", and how do you see your work evolving in relationship to its historical context?

**Nancy Fraser:** Let me start with the "post-socialist condition". I coined this term in the mid 1990s to characterize the predominant mood following the fall of communism, in which an apparently de-legitimated social egalitarianism gave way to a miraculously resurrected free-market fundamentalism. Whenever I use the expression "post-socialist condition", then, I put it in scare quotes to indicate that I am referring to an ideological trope. It's not, in other words, that I myself think socialism is irrelevant; rather, this was the common sense of the age. Naming an epochal shift in the grammar of political claims-making, the phrase signalled the fact that many progressive social actors had ceased couching their claims in terms of distributive justice and were resorting instead to new discourses of identity and difference. In this shift "from redistribution to recognition", as I called it, presumptively emancipatory movements such as feminism and anti-racism, which previously militated for social equality, began in the post-Cold War era to reinvent themselves as practitioners of the politics of recognition. In writing of the "post-socialist condition," then, I aimed to call attention to the decentring of the socialist imaginary, which had oriented leftwing struggles for a century and a half. I also sought to contextualize that sea change in political culture in relation to the spectacular rise of neoliberalism, whose proponents could only rejoice in the decline of social egalitarianism. It was this constellation, in which identity politics dovetailed all too neatly with neoliberalism, that constituted the "post-socialist" mood.

More recently, however, I have come to realize that something else was going on as well, which brings me to the notion of the "global" that you mentioned. So let's fast-forward ahead to 2003, when I started writing about the "problem of the frame". That is my expression for the new uncertainty that prevails today about the proper way of setting the bounds of justice and thus of deciding whose interests should count. In the Cold-War era, this "frame" issue was not a live question, as it generally went without saying that the unit within which justice applied was the modern territorial state. Today, however, that "Westphalian" framing of justice is in dispute, as transnational social movements of various kinds are foregrounding trans-border injustices and seeking to remap the bounds of justice on a broader scale. Struck by the new salience of this "politics of framing", I realized that my conception of the "post-socialist condition" had overlooked something important. By not posing the question of the frame explicitly, by writing about the politics of redistribution and recognition as if we already knew the proper bounds of those struggles, I had inadvertently ratified the default, Westphalian, position and foreclosed alternative possibilities. Today, with the benefit of hindsight, I have come to see that the shift from redistribution to recognition was actually part of a deeper shift — from an era in which the Westphalian frame went without saying to one in which it has become contested. Thus, my diagnosis of the times has altered. To my earlier conception, centred on the conjunction of neo-liberalism and identity politics, I would now add another element: the current sense of uncertainty about the frame. This last element seems to me to be a defining feature of the present zeitgeist.

**Alfredo Gomez-Müller:** Regarding the notion of "post-socialism", could it be said today that it is a concept that is no longer operative from the point of view of political analysis or political struggles insofar as it refers to a precise historical experience and seems to liquidate the entire political and theoretical heritage of the struggles for emancipation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which today still play a very important role in the imaginary of political emancipation?

**NF:** Yes and no. I don't want to link the decline of the socialist imaginary too tightly to the collapse of Soviet Union and real-existing communism. As I see it, the problem runs deeper than that. If it had only been communism, then the problematic of socialist egalitarianism would have still resonated after 1989 — more than before, even, as democratic socialists would have finally been rid of the Stalinist albatross. But that is not in fact what happened. Far from empowering the democratic Left, the fall of communism seemed to suck the energy out of movements with social egalitarian aspirations. That was obvious in eastern Europe, where the most naive romance of the market led to an orgy of privatization and speculation, but the West European Left was also demoralized. Faced the apparent "triumph of capitalism", many social democrats lost their nerve and rushed to accommodate neoliberalism. All this, too, belongs to the "post-socialist condition". But let me be clear. I am not saying that there no longer exist movements oriented to egalitarian redistribution or people who consider themselves socialists — I myself am one of them! However, such currents are isolated and on the defensive. Certainly, major labour and leftwing political parties no longer articulate claims for distributive justice in a serious way — at least at the national level.

However, if we look at the transnational level, the picture is different. There, we can see some emancipatory radical-egalitarian energies. Notwithstanding the NGO-ification of transnational politics and the bureaucratization of "Europe," which are highly problematic, some such energies have found a

home in and around the World Social Forum. Whatever its defects, the WSF has served as a space of leftwing communication and mobilization, especially concerning the problem of the frame I just spoke of. Here, at the transnational level, the Westphalian frame is contested by movements aiming to enlarge the bounds of justice. This is the level I now look to for emancipatory egalitarian currents that could challenge the "postsocialist" commonsense of the present era.

**GR:** I would like to ask you a methodological question regarding the role of totality in your work. You have presented your project at times as an attempt to theorize capitalist society as a totality by combining moral philosophy, social theory and political analysis. Could you discuss why it is important to reject the poststructuralist *idée reçue* according to which the "totality" is forever inaccessible? I would also be interested in hearing what you have to say about the role of culture — in the aesthetic sense of the term — in your critical theory of society. Thus far, the domain of aesthetics has been largely absent from your work when compared with other critical theorists interested in providing a total theory of society. Would you be willing to shed some light on this issue by relating it to your overall methodological project?

**NF:** Let me split your question into two parts, beginning with the issue of totality. I certainly understand why you characterize my orientation on this question as anti-poststructuralist, as there was a time in which I did defend the project of theorizing the social totality against such critics as Lyotard. Today, however, poststructuralism is not the primary target of my intervention. In *Redistribution or Recognition?* I meant rather to stake out a position against anti-totalizing currents within Critical Theory itself. Historically, as you know, the Frankfurt School championed interdisciplinary inquiry integrating philosophical reflection with empirical social research. The idea was to develop a broad picture of the era's characteristic power asymmetries and injustices, its social fault lines and political dilemmas, its emancipatory aspirations and transformative possibilities. At present, however, that ambitious totalizing project has been abandoned by most of the "third generation" of critical theorists in favour a more modest disciplinary division of labour. Axel Honneth and I are virtually alone among this post-Habermasian generation in remaining committed to the project of an interdisciplinary "critical social theory." Most of our colleagues are doing free-standing moral philosophy or political theory or legal theory, as if it were possible to think about such matters in isolation from contemporary capitalism and culture. That is not possible, in my view. As I see it, many so-called Critical Theorists have unwittingly capitulated to the forms of professional specialization that organize bourgeois academia, if I may use such a provocative term.

In any case, it was there, *within* the universe of Critical Theory, that I meant to defend the project of theorizing the social totality in *Redistribution or Recognition?* In contrast, I don't see myself fighting battles with poststructuralism today. In the past, I did fight those battles to a certain extent, although even then I always had one foot in both camps, being one of the few thinkers who sought to integrate the best insights of Habermas and Foucault. But now with the passing of Foucault, Bourdieu, Derrida and other key figures of that great generation, leftwing poststructuralism doesn't seem to me a live project, with the possible exception of Judith Butler, whose work I greatly admire.

In the end, moreover, my argument for theorizing the social totality is less philosophical than political. I understand perfectly well all the reasons — philosophical and epistemological — why one can never achieve a definitive totalization. But the question remains whether an emancipatory politics nevertheless needs a large-scale working picture of its time, what we in the New Left used to call "an analysis". I think it does. Absent such picture, and one lacks an orientation, a sense of where one is going and of where the obstacles and opportunities lie. Then, too, absent an account of the deep structural sources of injustice, which discloses the hidden connections among apparently discrete "social problems", and it is all too easy to fall into the sort of single-issue politics that is so prevalent — and so inadequate — today. I could give you lots of examples, including that of second-wave feminism, of how, for want of an account of the social totality, a potentially transformative movement has devolved into an interest group. Against the grain of current fashion, then, I continue to hope for a Left that is oriented toward large-scale social transformation, grounded in a totalizing "analysis".

Now let me come to the second part of your question, concerning culture. You are right that culture has entered my theorizing in a limited way, tailored to a specific purpose. For at least ten years, my thinking has been aimed at developing an expanded theory of justice, capable of integrating the problematic of recognition with that of distribution, and more recently with that of representation. As a result, I have been interested in culture only insofar as it is a *medium of injustice*. For this project, I take the relevant slice of culture to be institutionalized patterns of value that regulate social interaction. When such patterns are hierarchical, I claim, the effect is to impede some actors from participating on a par with others in social interaction. That for me is the very definition of injustice in general — and of misrecognition in particular. Thus, unlike Honneth and Taylor, I understand the wrong of misrecognition in terms of *status subordination*. For me, accordingly, to be misrecognized is to be denied the status of a peer, or full partner in social life, by virtue of institutionalized hierarchies of cultural value. Seen this way, via the "status model", injustices of misrecognition are unlike those of maldistribution in that they are rooted in the status order, as opposed to the economic structure, of society. It is this aspect of culture, as the medium for elaborating hierarchies of status, which has been my primary focus. For me, accordingly, the principal task of cultural analysis is to understand how institutionalized significations and norms entrench differential capacities for social participation. In general, then, my work addresses culture only in this one, very limited sense. But, of course, this limited sense is not unrelated to other, more "aesthetic" notions of culture. One can analyse film, for example, to illuminate the processes by which cultural representations filter down to everyday life and reshape mentalities, reinforcing or challenging hierarchical patterns of value. One can analyse, too, the processes by which such representations affect people's self-understandings, inflect their views of what's just, and subtly make their effects felt in the political public sphere. Of course, I am a social philosopher, not a scholar of cultural studies, so I don't usually perform such analyses myself. But the bottom line is that I am interested in culture from the standpoint of the theory of (in)justice, of which it forms an essential part.

**AGM:** Authors like Will Kymlicka criticize the fact that in approaches to cultural justice, demands for cultural justice "in the strict sense" are often assimilated to other types of identity claims (gender, sex, etc.). In your reflections on the question of recognition, you mention properly cultural recognition among other types of recognition. Isn't there a problem in this

insofar as there is a specificity to demands of cultural justice, which refer back to the specificity of culture as the place of production of the symbolic, that is to say of meaning and of value?

**NF:** I see no problem in trying to develop a general account of recognition that can illuminate the entire range of claims and struggles that you mention. Quite the opposite, actually. That is precisely what I think a theory of recognition should do! For me, the difficulty lies elsewhere, in the widespread use of the phrase "politics of recognition" as a synonym for identity politics. Implying that the only meaning of recognition is the affirmation of group specificity, that use muddies important distinctions among different kinds of recognition, such as universalist or deconstructive recognition. It was in the hope of promoting "transformative" alternatives that I have argued against the reduction of the politics of recognition to identity politics. That argument cut two ways: first, it countered economistic thinkers, like the American writer Thomas Frank, who propose to throw out the baby of non-identitarian recognition claims with the bathwater of identity politics; and second, it encouraged feminists and multiculturalists to de-psychologize their struggles by adopting a non-identitarian politics of recognition focused on changing social institutions. In response to Frank, then, I am saying that there exist genuine injustices of misrecognition that cannot be reduced to maldistribution and that demand attention in their own right. In response to identitarian currents of feminism and multiculturalism, I am saying that the core injustice of misrecognition is not deformed identity but status hierarchy — hence, that the right response is not necessarily to affirm group-specific identity but to de-institutionalize hierarchical patterns of culture value that impede parity of participation and to replace them with patterns that foster parity. To both sides, then, I am saying that there exists another kind of politics of recognition, which concerns culture in the limited sense I just described.

This approach differs from that of Kymlicka, who is concerned with culture in a different sense — a sense even narrower, I think, than mine. In his case, the focus is on issues such as whether minority-language group children must receive school instruction in the language spoken in their families, whether minority national or religious holidays are officially celebrated, whether minority language speakers have resources to support film and theatrical production, etc. These are cultural issues in a very specific — predominantly linguistic — sense, narrower, as I said, than my own. Like Kymlicka, I maintain that such issues raise genuine questions of justice, that a society that gets them wrong will entrench injustices in the sense of disparities of participation. But he would agree, I think, that it is equally important to address status inequities that result from other kinds of institutionalized value hierarchies. In other words, not all valid claims for recognition concern disadvantages that result from the sharing of political space by majority and minority language groups; and not all seek to validate linguistic pluralism. Some injustices of misrecognition arise, rather, from institutionalized patterns of cultural value that overarch *all* language groups. Such injustices could very well remain in force, even after minority language rights have been secured. In some cases, they could even be reinforced through such rights. For this reason, I am sceptical of Kymlicka's equation of culture with language and of his notion of a "societal culture". Both of those notions seem to me to invite essentialization of complex identities and reification of cross-cutting social divisions.

In general, then, I am saying that, while Kymlicka's pluralist model may seem apropos for the situation of Canadian francophones, it is not helpful for

understanding other kinds of misrecognition — for example, those rooted in institutionalized gender hierarchies, which subtend *every* Canadian language group, even if not in precisely the same way. Certainly, these two cases suggest different pictures of "the cultural aspect of oppression". But the question is: is there a conception of recognition that can comprehend both of them? In my view, the pluralist model cannot satisfactorily deal with the second (gendered) one. In contrast, the status model illuminates both. Both cases can be usefully analysed as denials of participatory parity that are effectuated through the institutionalization of hierarchical patterns of cultural value. Hence both cases demand a political response that aims to deinstitutionalize those value patterns in favour of alternatives that promote parity.

**AGM:** It seems to me that Kymlicka raises the question of cultural justice in contexts of cultural oppression. At root, there is the demand for cultural recognition, which does not necessarily imply identity-based deviations, that is to say ideological and political conceptions that conceive of identity in essentialist and substantialist terms. I understand your distrust regarding these conceptions, and I have the impression that it is in order to avoid this risk that you pose the problem of cultural justice in terms of pure justice or law. You say in one of your articles that "it is not because human beings need culture that we need to recognize the right to culture, it is because oppression is unjust." It is necessary to struggle against cultural oppression because it is unjust, but not because cultural belonging is a fundamental need for human beings. Why is it necessary to dissociate the two levels, the juridico-political level and the anthropological level of the relationship of the subject to his or her culture(s) of belonging?

**NF:** Let me start by clearing up one small point: it's not the case that I conflate justice with law. For me, justice and law are not on the same level. In my conception, justice consists in the absence of socially institutionalized obstacles to participatory parity. Law, in contrast, is one among several different vehicles through which such obstacles can be institutionalized. Thus, while some obstacles to participation, such as the prohibition on gay marriage, are directly and expressly juridified, others are institutionalized non-juridically — via market processes, family forms, professional cultures, communicative constructions and/or informal practices in civil society. It follows that not all recognition struggles are properly directed at legal change; some, rather, should target these other modes of institutionalization.

But let me turn now to the main point of your question. Why, you ask, do I dissociate the theory of justice from the "anthropological need for culture"? The first reason is that I am unsure that there exists such an "anthropological need". That idea is but one among many rival comprehensive theories of human being, all of which are hotly contested. I strongly doubt the argument among these rival views will be definitively settled any time soon. All the more reason, then, not to mortgage a political conception of justice to any one sectarian view, which could very well turn out to be wrong. In my view, a political conception of justice should be non-sectarian, compatible with a variety of different philosophical anthropologies. This is an insight I learned from John Rawls, with whom I disagreed about much else.

The second reason is that the idea of an anthropological need for culture suggests a picture of the world in which everyone has or desires one and only one cultural home, which is sharply bounded and distinguished from others, and which should be valued and preserved intact. Whatever its merits for

earlier times (which I doubt!), this picture is deeply at odds with forms of life in the present era of globalization. In today's world of transcultural interaction, hybridization is so intense that no one can say authoritatively where one culture ends and another one begins. To speak of a deep anthropological need for a valued cultural home in this context can only be nostalgic and conservative. A more fruitful approach would interrogate power asymmetries among peoples who identify with different cultures, with the aim of disclosing injustices — in the sense of obstacles to parity of participation. But the question still remains, how are such obstacles best dismantled? It is understandable that groups of people who feel they are too small and powerless to attain parity in a large social arena may want to withdraw into a smaller arena as if to say, "at least give us control over this!" In some cases, that could be an appropriate strategy for achieving a semblance of parity, but it is not always the best way.

**GR:** I want to ask you a question about one of the strategies that you regularly use for finessing the borders between economics and culture, a strategy that I would call the "dialectic of false antitheses." Whether it is recognition and redistribution, monologism and proceduralism, affirmative and transformative remedies, the work of Benhabib and Butler, or other "apparent opposites", you often seek to overcome dichotomies while nonetheless maintaining analytic distinctions between the two elements that are synthesized, making for a veritable *Aufhebung*. Could you discuss the role of this strategy in your work and situate it historically in relationship to the Hegelian and Marxist traditions? Secondly, I wanted to know if you saw any risks in deploying the same logic in rather heteroclitic situations. Is there a danger of imposing this logic on the world rather than simply discovering it? For example, you refuse many of the traditional labels in political theory (liberalism versus communitarianism, social democracy versus multiculturalism, etc.) in order to recast all of these movements in terms of two key concepts: redistribution (including Marxism, the welfare state, the Anglo–American liberal tradition, etc.) and recognition (including the communitarian tradition, multiculturalism, deconstruction, etc.). Many authors would reject these classifications as oversimplifications.

**NF:** There is indeed a Hegelian spirit hovering over much of my work, aimed at reconciling false antitheses. But it is tempered by another, countervailing spirit, which insists on the reality of conflict and opposes premature reconciliation. Focusing on the first of these moments, you rightly note my tendency to reject "either/or" constructions in favour of "both/and" ones, which kicks in whenever I see something of value in each of two commonly opposed positions — or conversely, when I see a blind spot in each position and find neither to be adequate as it stands. In such cases, my Hegelian instincts surface, leading me to try to reconcile such false antitheses as Habermas versus Foucault, critical theory versus poststructuralism, and redistribution versus recognition. In the last case, I responded, in the mid–1990s, to the sharp polarization, especially in the United States, between multiculturalism and social democracy by insisting that the Left need not be forced into this Hobson's choice, because there was a way to integrate the legitimate concerns of both sides. That move expressed my Hegelian instincts. But it was immediately complicated by another, anti–Hegelian, impulse, which pulled in the opposite direction. Alert to the dangers of false, premature reconciliation, that second impulse led me to focus on the actual tensions between the two political orientations. Thus, I insisted, first, that reconciling redistribution and recognition was conceptually possible and highly desirable, but that, second, it was easier said than done, given that dominant (identitarian) forms of recognition politics typically work against the usual (affirmative) forms of

redistributive politics. No true *Aufhebung* is possible, insofar as these tensions are real. They cannot be definitively overcome but only finessed. In *Redistribution or Recognition?*, accordingly, I devote a great deal of attention to analysing the perverse unintended consequences that recognition struggles can have for redistribution struggles — and vice-versa — and to devising conceptual strategies through which such consequences can be mitigated. I insist, in other words, that these two political orientations do not automatically harmonize through a snap of the fingers. Rather, they need to be worked through.

**GR:** Although I'd be surprised to learn of any direct influence, this reminds me of Paul Ricoeur's work and what I would call his "dialectic of reconciliation". Rather than a negative dialectic, there is an attempt to bring forth and combine the best elements from two opposing theses while simultaneously recognizing that there can never be a simple synthesis.

**NF:** That's an interesting observation. I don't know Ricoeur's work very well. But your description makes me think that on this point at least he and I have something in common. As you say, my own approach is neither a straightforward Hegelian dialectic, nor a straightforward negative dialectic.

**AGM:** In the realm of action, can one and must one "reconcile" transformative politics and affirmative politics, to use the terminology of your article from 1995 on the "dilemmas" of justice in a "post-socialist" era? In this text, you maintain that only transformative methods allow for an effective struggle against cultural injustice since "vulgar multiculturalism", which is a simple affirmative solution, does not act at the level of the causes of ethnico-cultural segregation. However, is this really possible? Is it possible to set up a purely transformative politics? Isn't it necessary to combine these two political models according to the circumstances?

**NF:** You have just recapitulated my own argument in *Redistribution or Recognition!* In that 2003 book I modified the 1995 formulation you cited, which appeared inadequate for exactly the reasons you said. In the interim, I came to see that I had formulated the contrast between affirmative and transformative remedies in an overly abstract and decontextualized way. To correct that, I went back to a largely forgotten French thinker of the New Left, whom my students had never heard of: André Gorz. In *Strategy for Labour*, Gorz introduced the idea of "non-reformist reforms": reforms that appear in the abstract to be affirmative, insofar as they don't directly challenge the deep structures that generate injustice, but that nevertheless could, in a given context, have long-term transformative effects, insofar as they alter the balance of power in ways that enable more radical claims later on. Put differently, non-reformist reforms set in motion a trajectory that becomes increasingly transformative over time, even though they start out as affirmative. This conception proved useful to me, as it softened the overly sharp distinction with which I had begun and enabled more nuanced, context-sensitive consideration of political possibilities.

**GR:** Concerning the evolution of your work, it is arguable that your most recent publications are generally more optimistic about democratic potential than your earlier writings. I would like to ask you about the nature of democratic dialogue and, more specifically, about the role of the mass media, economic interest, professional politicians, and ideological matrices in the fabrication and manipulation of what is perceived as free public opinion and open democratic debate. Is there ever a pure form of dialogical proceduralism

uncontaminated by political imaginaries, ideological constructs and various networks of power relations? To what extent is it necessary to take into account the constraints and norms that pre-program supposedly "democratic" dialogue?

**NF:** Your question fascinates me, because it offers a third-person view of my work that is at odds with my own first-person experience of it. From "the inside," I feel more pessimistic than ever about the state of the world and the Left. As an American trying to survive the age of Bush, I can assure you that I feel no optimism whatever! No thinking person can live in the United States today, as I do, and not be revolted by the existing state of so-called democratic publicity. The distortions are so egregious that they need to be made central to any critical theory of the present. Alas, however, they play little role in much of contemporary "deliberative democracy," which is blithely unconcerned with the powerful forces that skew actually existing communication in contemporary society.

As it turns out, I have been thinking lately about how to renew the critical theory of the public sphere. In a recent essay, "Transnationalizing the Public Sphere," I reconstructed the debates from Habermas's 1962 book through *Between Facts and Norms* so as to make visible the "Westphalian" presuppositions of all the contributors, including myself. The result was to recast the whole problem of "democratic publicity." However hard it may have been earlier to understand how publicity could play a democratic emancipatory role within a territorial state, it is incomparably more difficult to imagine such a thing under current conditions, when not only the issues debated but also the powers that distort communication are trans-territorial. In the present era, we have to deal somehow not only with the sorts of structural distortions you noted, but also with their exacerbation via transnationalization — of production, finance, governance, and communication. These conditions vastly compound the familiar difficulties. What could it possibly mean for public opinion to be democratically legitimate and politically efficacious, when it is neither formulated by fellow citizens, who putatively enjoy a shared status of political equality, nor addressed to a sovereign state with the capacity to implement the interlocutors' will and solve their problems?

And yet, despite these mind-boggling deformations, we have no medium other than "democratic" publicity for waging political struggles, including struggles that contest these distortions. (Assuming, as I do, that we want to put aside military means.) What that means is that we have to imagine ways of converting a vicious circle into a virtuous spiral. The vicious circle is obvious enough: those with less power have less voice, which means that the powerful determine both the political agenda and political outcomes, which in turn means that the powerless not only remain such but actually lose voice over time. The virtuous spiral is harder to envision: movements of the less powerful acquire enough voice to win some reforms, however modest, that level the playing field to some degree, however slight, which augments their political voice in the next round, enabling somewhat less modest reforms, and so on. I'm not optimistic in the empirical sense that I expect to see such virtuous spirals develop on a broad scale in the near future. But I insist on the conceptual possibility.

**GR:** Your position nonetheless shows signs of a rather robust optimism in democratic participation. Is it possible that democratic participation itself is already constructed and coded in such a way that what can be said in the public sphere simply amounts to a solicited set of possible statements, which

generally correspond to the yes/no binary that favours the statistical quantification of "public opinion"? Hasn't democracy become, at least in part, an intermittent charade of human freedom that is ritualistically re-activated according to the chronological laws imposed by electoral calendars? If there is at least a grain of truth to these characterizations? Do you see this as causing problems for "democratic participation"?

**NF:** Absolutely. However, I have the impression that you and I may mean something different by "democratic participation". I do not limit democratic participation to claims-making in the official political arena of a state. I also include para-organisation and subaltern contestation in what I once called "subaltern counterpublics". Struggles for political voice also belong, in my view, in the category of "democratic participation", even when they seek to change the boundaries and meaning of that expression. But I am tempted to turn your question around. I believe that the new social movements in the United States put too much of their energy in the last two decades into such para-struggles, effectively abdicating the official national political public sphere. In abstaining from electoral politics, they effectively abandoned that terrain to the Right, with what disastrous results we all know. Here, then, is another of those both/and situations. Social-justice movements need to participate simultaneously in both types of arenas, subaltern and official. It is not an either/or choice.

**AGM:** The conceptual couple of the just and the good, which has been maintained by the deontologists, is at the core of the liberal conception of democracy. In certain of your texts from the 1990s, you appropriate this distinction, which seems to me to rest on relatively problematic political, ideological, and anthropological elements. The debate between the liberals and the communitarians, for example, has shed sufficient light on the problematic aspect of the individualist-atomistic presuppositions that underlie this distinction, which is in fact a specific historical construct. Today, how do you view the couple of the just and the good? Is it a framework capable of universalization or a contingent production that is proper to certain western political cultures, and which could be modified? Rawls' work sometimes gives the impression that it is an immutable structure.

**NF:** Certainly, the distinction between the right and the good emerged historically. It arose from, and makes sense in, specifically modern contexts that have experienced or absorbed the fruits of the Protestant reformation — or something analogous; and it supposes that individuals are the basic units of moral concern, whose autonomy deserves respect. So, yes, I agree with the thrust of your own analysis. Nevertheless, I endorse this distinction and the related thesis of the priority of the right over the good. The communitarian alternative, which posits a transcendent good that binds even those who reject it, is not defensible in contexts of ethical pluralism. Granted, the priority of the right has a historical genesis and is associated with the West (despite possible non-western analogues). But we should distinguish the question of its genesis from that of its validity. As I see it, moreover, the view that the individual is the basic unit of moral concern does not represent a pernicious anti-social individualism. It in no way denies the existence or value of community ties and affiliations; it simply asks us to evaluate such arrangements in terms of their effects on individuals. The reason is that in the end it is individuals who bleed and suffer and die. So that's where the ultimate reckoning of injustice has to be made. Thus, it is not the case, as Michael Sandel once assumed, that those who accord moral primacy to individuals necessarily subscribe to an atomistic ontology that neglects solidarities and communities. What led Sandel to that

mistaken view, I think, was a confusion of levels. He failed to appreciate that one can consistently oppose liberalism as an economic philosophy and as a social ontology (in Margaret Thatcher's sense of "there is no such thing as society"), while endorsing it politically, as an alternative to communitarianism, which conditions social support for community life on individual protections, such as the rights of dissent and exit. Such rights, which are very important for the dominated fractions within communities, including women, must be understood as individual freedoms. This does not mean that communities are unimportant; it means only that they do not get a green light to oppress individuals.

**AGM:** In the work of Taylor and Sandel, it seems to me that these rights to critique are not called into question. Moreover, Taylor sees himself as a "liberal holist".

**NF:** I wouldn't try to pigeonhole Taylor. He's a complicated and original thinker who has one foot in each camp. The question for me is not whether or not he is a liberal, but whether or not his position is coherent. I would ask the same question about Michael Walzer, who claims to be a liberal of a certain (non-standard) kind but who turns out on many pressing political issues to lack sufficient respect for the right to dissent, and whose communitarian Zionist loyalties led him to some positions that I consider truly shameful...

**AGM:** Concerning the war in Iraq?

**NF:** Yes. Definitely. As I see it, Walzer's support for the Iraq war was dictated by, and instrumentally subordinated to, his Zionism. That said, I must add right away that I nevertheless admire him as a theorist, especially as a theorist of "just war". I am convinced that had he applied that theory in a genuinely unbiased fashion he would have opposed the invasion of Iraq.

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