

# Rethinking Redistribution and Recognition: Class, Identity, and the Conditions for Radical Politics in the “Postsocialist” Age

Magnus Nilsson

*Department of International Migration and Ethnic Relations, Malmö University*

**ABSTRACT.** In “From Redistribution to Recognition?” Nancy Fraser formulates a theory aiming at defending only those versions of identity politics that can be coherently combined with socialist politics. Many commentators have criticized the analytical distinction between economic and cultural injustice underpinning this theory. I argue, however, that it is Fraser’s *inability* to uphold this distinction that makes her argument problematic, and that a clearer analytical distinction between the categories *class* and *identity* makes possible both a more theoretically satisfying critique of the “postsocialist” condition and the formulation of a radical politics that addresses economic as well as cultural injustices.

Key words: Nancy Fraser, recognition, redistribution, class, identity, Marxism

## Introduction

In her article “From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a ‘Postsocialist’ Age” (Fraser 1997),<sup>1</sup> Nancy Fraser makes a compelling analysis of the conditions for contemporary radical politics. Her starting point is the insight that the “struggle for recognition” has become “the paradigmatic form of political conflict in the late twentieth century,” and that, as a result of this, “cultural recognition” often “displaces socioeconomic redistribution as the remedy for injustice and the goal of political struggle” (Fraser 1997:11). This of course means that a “socialist imaginary”—described by Fraser as “centered on terms such as ‘interest,’ ‘exploitation,’ and ‘redistribution’”—becomes marginalized. (In fact, this

is what makes the “postsocialist” age “postsocialist.”) Fraser’s ambition is to rescue socialist politics, but not at the cost of rejecting recognition politics. Instead she wants to develop a “critical theory of recognition” that “identifies and defends only those versions of the cultural politics of difference that can be coherently combined with the social politics of equality” (Fraser 1997:11-12).

Fraser’s conceptualization of one of the central problems for radical politics in the “postsocialist” age is impressive, and her ambition to rescue socialist notions of justice is inspiring. Nevertheless her argument is problematic.

The most common criticism of Fraser’s theory has been aimed at her analytical distinction between on the one hand economic injustice/redistribution politics, and on the other hand cultural injustice/recognition politics (Alcoff 2007; Butler 1997; Smith 2001; Swanson 2005; Yar 2001; Young 1997). I argue,

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1 The article was originally published in *New Left Review*, No. 212 (Fraser 1995). It was re-printed two years later as chapter one in Fraser’s book *Justice Interruptus* (Fraser 1997). All quotations are taken from the latter publication.

however, that it is Fraser's *inability* to uphold this distinction that makes her theory problematic.

One problem is that Fraser's argument, to some extent, is based on a false analogy between the concept class and concepts such as "race" and gender. Since a distinction between these concepts is essential for the distinction between socialist politics—defined here as the struggle for "the transition from the prevalence of the capitalist to that of the communist fundamental class process" (Resnick & Wolff 1989:123)<sup>2</sup>—and the politics of cultural difference, this constitutes a problem for Fraser's attempt to assess the compatibility of different versions of these kinds of politics, and hence for her central theoretical aim. This becomes especially visible when the so-called redistribution-recognition dilemma—which, according to Fraser, encapsulates the theoretical problems her theory aims to overcome—is subjected to closer analysis.

Another problem, closely related to the one just described, is that Fraser's theory rests on a rather abstract conception of economic injustice, which gives no special status to class-injustice. This makes the relationship between Fraser's conception of redistribution politics and the Marxist/socialist understanding of class politics problematic. In this article I will use Stephen A. Resnick's and Richard D. Wolff's (1989:20) definition of the Marxian concept class as "the process of producing and appropriating surplus labor." This definition constructs class processes as being "different from other economic processes (e.g., commodity exchange, borrowing/lending, saving money, etc.) as well as from cultural, political, and natural processes." It thus necessitates the analytical division of "social processes into class and nonclass categories," and, as a consequence, a distinction between the different kinds of injustice characteristic of different economic processes. The fundamental injustice in class processes is *exploitation*, defined by Resnick and Wolff as the appropriation of labourers' surplus labour by "nonlaborers." It is the inability to recognize the specific character of this injustice that makes Fraser's conception of economic injustice, and thus her attempt to rescue socialist poli-

tics, problematic. This becomes especially acute when her argument that recognition injustice should be understood as "status subordination" is analyzed.

In the following I'll give a brief summary of Fraser's theory and identify its weaknesses. My central argument is that the problems described above makes it possible to view Fraser's theory as symptomatic for a tendency in contemporary left thinking described and critiqued by Resnick and Wolff (2005a:36):

What is [...] puzzling is that so many on the Left, otherwise critical of modern capitalism, still seem to have such trouble seeing exploitation as a crime of unpaid labor, one that deeply damages its victims. It seems to us that many of those otherwise sympathetic to Marxism have a need instead to lose the specificity of exploitation and its social effects by (1) focusing instead on other forms of injustices, or (2) collapsing class and nonclass injustices as if they were identical, or (3) assuming that the eradication of nonclass injustices will necessarily eliminate exploitation as well. The nonclass injustices seem to exhaust so many left critiques. [...] Indeed, left criticism often designate these nonclass outrages as "exploitation," which thus becomes a general kind of oppression in which Marx's specific and different definition focused on the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus largely disappears from view.

I will, however, not just criticize Fraser's theory, but also propose a way forward. My suggestion is that a clearer distinction between, on the one hand the concept class and, on the other hand concepts signifying collectivities based on identities, should be made. This, in turn, calls for a reformulation of Fraser's redistribution-recognition dilemma as a "transformation-affirmation dilemma." I also argue that the distinction between classes and identity-based collectivities calls for a distinction between different kinds of economic injustices, namely, class-injustice (exploitation of surplus labour) and the economic injustices suffered by identity-collectivities subjected to status subordination respectively. From this point of departure a more theoretically satisfying critique of the "postsocialist" condition is possible, as well as a laying of a more fruitful foundation for a radical politics that addresses both economic (class as well as non-class) and cultural injustices.

2 My use of Resnick's and Wolff's terminology does not mean that I subscribe to their notion of over-determination.

### The “Postsocialist” Condition and the Redistribution-Recognition Dilemma

One of Fraser’s main aims in “From Redistribution to Recognition?” (1997:12-14) is to theorize “the ways in which economic disadvantage and cultural disrespect are currently entwined with and support one another,” and to clarify “the political dilemmas that arise when we try to combat both those injustices simultaneously.” Her first step toward such a theorization is to establish a distinction between two kinds of injustice, namely socioeconomic and cultural injustice respectively.<sup>3</sup> The former is “rooted in the political-economic structure of society,” and results in forms of oppression such as “exploitation,” “marginalization,” and “deprivation.” The latter is “rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication,” and results in forms of oppression such as “cultural domination,” “nonrecognition,” and “disrespect.”

Socioeconomic and cultural injustices are, according to Fraser (1997:14-15), “usually interimblicated so as to reinforce each other dialectically.” Nonetheless, they are remedied in different ways. The remedy for socioeconomic injustice is “political-economic restructuring of some sort,” while the remedy for cultural injustice is “some sort of cultural or symbolic change.” Fraser calls these remedies “redistribution” and “recognition” respectively.

In Fraser’s (1997:16-17) view, “the Marxian conception of the exploited class, understood in an orthodox way” is a mode of collectivity that fits “the redistribution model of justice”:

Class is a mode of social differentiation that is rooted in the political-economic structure of society. A class exists as a collectivity only by virtue of its position in that structure and of its relation to other classes. Thus, the Marxian working class is the body of persons in a capitalist society who must sell their labor power under arrangements that authorize the capitalist class to appropriate surplus productivity for its private benefit.

3 Recently Fraser (2007:313) has reformulated this conceptualization of injustice. Her current position is that “an adequate theory of justice must be *three-dimensional*.” The third dimension is “*representation*.” Since this addition to Fraser’s theory has no relevance for my argument, I will not comment further upon it.

As example of an “ideal-typical mode of collectivity that fits the recognition model of justice” Fraser (1997:18-19) gives “a despised sexuality.” She also identifies collectivities who are “differentiated as collectivities by virtue of *both* the political-economic structure *and* the cultural-valuational structure of society,” and thus suffer both economic and cultural injustices. She calls these “bivalent” or “two-dimensional” collectivities, and gives gender and “race” as typical examples.<sup>4</sup>

One central thesis in Fraser’s argument is that recognition claims and claims for redistribution have different consequences for group differentiation:

Recognition claims often take the form of calling attention to, if not performatively creating, the putative specificity of some group and then of affirming its value. Thus, they tend to promote group differentiation. Redistribution claims, in contrast, often call for abolishing economic arrangements that underpin group specificity. [...] Thus, they tend to promote group dedifferentiation. [Fraser 1997:16]

It is this difference that gives rise to what Fraser (1997:16) calls “the redistribution-recognition dilemma”—a dilemma typical for “two-dimensional” collectivities: “People who are subject to both cultural injustice and economic injustice need both recognition and redistribution. They need both to claim and to deny their specificity.”

In order to solve the redistribution-recognition dilemma Fraser (1997:23) makes a distinction between two kinds of remedies for injustice, namely “affirmation” and “transformation”:

By affirmative remedies for injustice I mean remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them. By transformative remedies, in contrast, I mean remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative frameworks.

Affirmative remedies for cultural injustices can, according to Fraser (1997:24-25), be associated with

4 The term “bivalent” is used in Fraser 1997. The term “two-dimensional” is used in Fraser 2003. I will henceforth use the latter formulation.

“mainstream multiculturalism,” which “proposes to redress disrespect by revaluing unjustly devalued group identities, while leaving intact both the contents of those identities and the group differentiations that underlie them.” Transformative remedies for cultural injustices, in contrast, “redress disrespect by transforming the underlying cultural-valuational structure,” thereby “destabilizing existing group identities and differentiations.” Fraser associates these remedies with “deconstruction.” When it comes to economic injustice, affirmative remedies “have been associated historically with the liberal welfare state,” and attempts to “redress end-state maldistribution, while leaving intact much of the underlying political economic structure.” Transformative remedies, on the other hand, “have been historically associated with socialism.” They would “redress unjust distribution by transforming the underlying political-economic structure,” and thereby “not only alter the end-state distribution of consumption shares; they would also change the social division of labor and thus the conditions of existence for everyone.”

Here Fraser revises her earlier statement about the relationship between the struggle against injustice and group differentiation. Now she claims that it is *affirmative* remedies (to both redistribution injustices and recognition injustices) that tend to promote group differentiation. She also argues (1997:25–26) that affirmative redistribution remedies may “end up creating injustices of recognition,” because they mark “the most disadvantaged as inherently deficient and insatiable, as always needing more and more.” “Affirmative redistribution can stigmatize the disadvantaged,” Fraser writes, “adding the insult of misrecognition to the injury of deprivation. Transformative redistribution, in contrast, can promote solidarity, helping to redress some forms of misrecognition.”

After making the distinction between transformation and affirmation, pointing out that affirmative remedies often promote group differentiation, and arguing that affirmative redistribution may cause injustices of recognition, Fraser (1997:28) tries to find a way out of the redistribution-recognition dilemma. The starting point for this attempt is an assessment of “the mutual compatibility of various remedial strate-

gies.” First she claims that “affirmative redistribution politics” seems to be “at odds with [...] transformative recognition politics.” The reason is that while the former kind of politics seems “to promote group differentiation, the second tends rather to destabilize it.” Her next claim is that transformative redistribution politics is at odds with affirmative recognition politics, since the first has a tendency to undermine group differentiation, whereas the second often promotes it. Thereafter she argues that affirmative recognition politics is compatible with affirmative redistribution politics, although the former might generate “backlash misrecognition.” Finally she claims that transformative redistribution politics goes well with transformative recognition politics, since both “tend to undermine existing group differentiations.”

Fraser’s conclusion, then (1997:31–32), is that for two-dimensional collectivities, the combination of transformative redistribution politics and transformative recognition politics (“socialism in the economy plus deconstruction in the culture”) is best suited for overcoming the redistribution-recognition dilemma. This is not only presented as a preferable theoretical understanding of a central political dilemma in the “postsocialist” age, but also as an appropriate foundation for political coalition building, and thus for the building of radical political movements that could transcend the limitations of the “postsocialist” political agenda.

### The False Picture of Class

One of the main criticisms of Fraser’s theory has been directed at her analytical separation of culture and economy, and thus of different kinds of collectivities. A recent example of this is Linda Martín Alcoff’s argument (2007:256) that Fraser’s theory produces a “misleading separation of class and race.” As I’ve already pointed out I do not subscribe to this criticism, which Fraser (2007:306), in her response to Alcoff, eloquently repudiates. My critique is instead that Fraser *doesn’t* uphold the necessary analytical distinction between classes and identity-based collectives, such as race, and that this flaws her theoretical understanding of the relationship between socialist politics and identity politics.

As has already been pointed out, Fraser (1997:11) views “the Marxian conception of an exploited class”

as “a mode of social differentiation that is rooted in the political-economic structure of society.” She also argues that the injustice suffered by an exploited class is “quintessentially a matter of redistribution.” It is with departure in this argument that she establishes her distinction between collectivities suffering from economic injustice and collectivities suffering from cultural injustice. This distinction is in itself in no way problematic. In fact, it is one of the features of Fraser’s theory that makes it so compelling as a starting point for combating the de-centering of class typical for the “postsocialist” age. But when used to understand “two-dimensional” collectivities, it seems to produce a false picture of these collectivities—a picture in which the distinction between the concept class and the concept identity collapses.

Fraser’s use of class as a paradigmatic example of a collectivity subjected to economic injustice leads her to the conclusion that transformative redistribution politics necessarily promotes group de-differentiation. This is certainly true for socialist politics aiming at the transition from the prevalence of the capitalist to that of the communist class process. As Resnick and Wolff have showed (2002:ix), “the class difference of capitalism” is “that the appropriators are different people from the producers.” Thus the difference is based on exploitation: “The appropriators of the surplus *exploit* its producers—appropriate the latter’s surplus product—insofar as and precisely because they are not also producers themselves.” Since the goal of socialist politics is the establishing of a “communist class structure,”—i.e. a class structure “in which the producers and appropriators are the same people”—this kind of transformative remedy for the economic injustice suffered by an exploited class would certainly result in the disappearance of this class. When it comes to two-dimensional collectivities, such as “race” or gender, however, transformative redistribution politics *does not* necessitate group de-differentiation, since these are not constituted by the economic injustices they suffer, but rather products of cultural processes.

According to Fraser (1997:19-20), gender is a two-dimensional collectivity since it is differentiated “by virtue of *both* the political-economic structure *and* the cultural-valuational structure of society.” Its

“political-economic dimensions” are products of the fact that gender “is a basic structuring principle of the political economy:”

On the one hand, gender structures the fundamental division between paid ‘productive’ labor and unpaid ‘reproductive’ and domestic labor, assigning women primary responsibility for the latter. On the other hand, gender also structures the division between higher-paid, male dominated, manufacturing and professional occupations and lower-paid, female dominated ‘pink-collar’ and domestic service occupations. The result is a political-economic structure that generates gender-specific modes of exploitation, marginalization, and deprivation. This structure constitutes gender as a political-economic differentiation endowed with certain class-like characteristics.

Thus, Fraser (1997:20) argues that “gender justice requires transforming the political economy so as to eliminate its gender structuring.” This, in turn, calls for “abolishing the gender division of labor,” which means to “put gender out of business as such.”

This is where Fraser establishes a false analogy between class and identity-collectivities. This analogy is based on the assumption that gender, like class, is a category *constituted* by the economic injustices it suffers, and on the consequential assumption that the category gender itself would necessarily be deconstructed by a transformative redistribution politics that put an end to the economic injustices suffered by gendered collectivities. The existence of women (or men) is, however, not the result of “political-economic differentiation.” Thus it does not follow, that transformative remedies for the economic injustices suffered by men and women would have to result in the disappearance of gender.

When discussing classes, Fraser (1997:17) argues that the cultural injustices they suffer are not “rooted directly in an autonomously unjust cultural structure,” but rather “derive from the political economy, as ideologies of class inferiority proliferate to justify exploitation.” In other words: cultural processes can help to “secure the extraction of surplus labor,” and thus to cause class injustice (Resnick and Wolff 1989:21). But this doesn’t change the fact that class is an economic, and not a cultural, category.

In analogy with Fraser's analysis of the relationship between the economic and cultural injustices suffered by exploited classes, I would like to claim that the economic injustices suffered by gender collectivities are not rooted in the socioeconomic structure of *capitalism* (the capitalist exploitation of surplus labour). Instead they derive from an unjust cultural structure, which legitimizes certain gendered modes of exploitation, but is not constitutive of the capitalist mode of production as such.

This is something that has been a major theme in Marxist scholarship in recent years. Rosemary Hennessy, for example (2006:389-390), has analyzed how cultural beliefs about identities effect forms of exploitation, with point of departure in Marx's idea that labour power consists of "both a physical dimension and another part that he calls 'the living personality'—what we might refer to now as subjectivity":

In order for the worker to sell his labor power, Marx says, he must have it at his disposal. [...] The "real individuality" of our particular living personalities that accompanies labor power does so through the normative, symbolic meanings that are a sort of second skin. Seemingly not necessary for one's ability to assemble wiring, sew sleeves, wait tables, or vacuum floors, this second skin is an extra. It is supplemental in the sense that that it is both necessary and a bonus, an aspect of a worker's subjectivity that can be managed and disciplined in ways that will potentially increase the value of the labor power the capitalist purchases.

Hennessy's main example is female workers:

The modern state's myth of possessive individualism applies to all citizens but, in fact, has a limited address. Some individuals do not have possession of themselves. Free market exchange relies on and takes advantage of the political and cultural dispossessions of certain subjects. The dispossessed are the subjects of surplus labor, or what we might more accurately call feminized labor. When the marks of femininity accompany the exchange of labor power for a wage, they offer a tacit promise to the buyer that the supervision of the physical life and living personality of the bearer of this labor power is out of her hands. And so they may be managed through regimes of surveillance and disciplinary technologies.

A similar line of thought is formulated by Richard McIntyre and Michael Hillard (2007:541) in their discussion of the effects of "engenderment" on different forms of exploitation: "Whereas in the household the cultural process of engenderment leads to women generally producing surplus labor for men, in the capitalist enterprise it shows up more as pay discrimination and differential access to employment and training." What is important here is the insistence that "engenderment"—even if it has economic effects—is a *cultural* process. Thus gender should be regarded as an analytical category different from the category class.

If this is done, gender can be viewed much in the same way as Fraser views sexuality. Fraser (1997:18) argues that the roots of homosexuality "do not lie in the political economy because homosexuals are distributed throughout the entire class structure of capitalist society, occupy no distinctive position in the division of labor, and do not constitute an exploited class." Nevertheless, she doesn't deny that gays and lesbians can suffer economic injustices. In "Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics" (2003:18) she presents the following list of examples: "They can be summarily dismissed from civilian employment and military service, are denied a broad range of family-based social-welfare benefits, and face major tax and inheritance liabilities." But this doesn't cause her to think about sexuality as a two-dimensional collectivity, and thus—as in the case with gender—as (at least in some respects) analogous with class.

Fraser's analysis of sexuality holds for gender (and other "two-dimensional" collectivities) as well. The economic injustices suffered by gendered collectivities (in their capacity of gendered collectivities) are fundamentally different from those suffered by exploited classes, in that they ultimately derive from the cultural sphere. And one important consequence of this difference is that a transformative redistribution politics would have different effects for classes and gendered collectivities respectively. While transformative remedies for economic injustice suffered by exploited classes (i.e. the abolition of exploitation) would inevitably lead to the disappearance of class, the category gender would not necessarily be made redundant by transformative remedies for the eco-

conomic injustices suffered by gendered collectivities. This shows that the fundamental difference between the categories gender and class is that the former is, above all, an *identity*, whereas the latter is not.

This is an insight that has been formulated over and over again within Marxist theory in recent years. One typical example is given by Barbara Foley (2002:28):

Marxism holds that class is a social relation of production, not—or at least not primarily—a subject position. Although membership in the working class may give rise to various modes of identity, the working class is defined as class through the process of exploitation—that is, the unequal exchange of wages for labor-power that results in the production of surplus-value. The working class consists of wage slaves. While such terms as “domination” and “oppression” may adequately define various features of the experience of inhabiting a society structured along class lines—especially for women and workers of color—“exploitation” is the principal engine driving the antagonism between what Marx called the “two great warring classes, bourgeoisie and proletariat.”

That Fraser (1997:17-18) is aware that class is not an identity-category becomes clear when she argues that “the task of the proletariat [...] is not simply to cut itself a better deal but ‘to abolish itself as a class.’ The last thing it needs is recognition of its difference. On the contrary, the only way to remedy the injustice is to put the proletariat out of business as a group.” But she doesn’t draw the necessary political consequences of this insight.

Identity-based collectivities do (and/or should) not necessarily strive for the abolishment of their collectivity. What identities want is rather, as Walter Benn Michaels empathically argues (2006a:297), “respect.” They want that their “difference” shouldn’t be “understood as and treated as inferiority.” Thus, the problem with Fraser’s theorizing of the relationship between economic and cultural injustice is that it doesn’t take into account the differences between collectivities based on identities, and classes constituted by their specific roles in class processes.

It might be important here to stress that the argument that classes are not identities is a theo-

retical argument aiming at establishing an analytical distinction between the concept class and concepts signifying identity-based collectivities, not a denial that identities can be formed around the concept class, and that these identities can be of fundamental relevance for socialist political struggle. That the concept class indeed does have this dimension is illustrated in Resnick’s and Wolff’s (2005b:560) discussion of class struggle as “groups of people in conflict over the quantitative and/or qualitative dimensions of producing, appropriating, or distributing surpluses.” Such struggles can take place “without the people involved being conscious of their class dimensions;” “that is, groups may see or focus only upon other dimensions (political, ethnic, religious, and so on) of their conflicts.” Nevertheless, the establishment of such a consciousness—a consciousness that would make the development of a class-identity possible—can very well be an important goal for socialists: “One major goal of Marxian analysis is [...] to make explicit the existence and social effects of those class processes so that social struggles will become self-consciously class struggles. By that we mean that social groups in struggle will explicitly place particular changes in class processes on their agendas.”

To acknowledge the role of class-identity or class-consciousness for political struggles is, however, not the same thing as arguing that “two-dimensional” identity-collectivities should be understood as analogous with classes.

### **From the Recognition-Redistribution Dilemma to the Transformation-Affirmation Dilemma**

The argument above has far-reaching consequences for Fraser’s critique of what she views as one of the central quandaries in “postsocialist” political thinking, namely the so-called recognition-redistribution dilemma. As has already been mentioned, this dilemma is a product of the different consequences for group differentiation that Fraser attributes to transformative redistribution politics and affirmative recognition politics respectively. Hence, the version of the dilemma that Fraser sees as specific for gender is a consequence of the fact that gender is a collectivity subjected to both socioeconomic and cultural

injustice, and, thus, in need of both redistribution remedies and recognition remedies:

Whereas the logic of redistribution is to put gender out of business as such, the logic of recognition is to valorize gender specificity. Here, then, is the feminist version of the redistribution-recognition dilemma: How can feminists fight simultaneously to abolish gender differentiation and to valorize gender specificity? [1997:21]

If, as I have argued above, the struggle against the economic injustices suffered by gendered collectivities doesn't necessarily put gender out of business, then this dilemma simply doesn't exist. And if the redistribution-recognition dilemma does not apply to two-dimensional collectivities, then this of course has consequences for Fraser's analysis of the possibilities for a radical politics that transcends the dominant "postsocialist" understanding of politics. One such consequence is that the combinations of affirmative redistribution and transformative recognition or transformative redistribution and affirmative recognition cannot so easily be dismissed as "unpromising." At least they cannot be dismissed on the ground presented by Fraser, namely that they would have conflicting effects for group differentiation. This, in turn, makes it clear that a theory better suited to deal with the political challenges posed by the "postsocialist" condition needs to be developed.

Such a theory should deal with the problem that Fraser set out to solve, namely that the rise of multiculturalism and identity politics has made the struggle for recognition the paradigmatic form of political conflict, thereby cancelling socialism from the political agenda. It should also, just like Fraser's theory, aim at identifying and defending those versions of recognition politics that can be coherently combined with socialist politics.

My analysis of the fundamental differences between classes and identity-collectivities shows that recognition politics does not *per se* constitute a problem for socialists struggling to end class injustice. Collectivities suffering from cultural injustice *should* demand recognition remedies. The problem with recognition politics arises only when it becomes paradigmatic for politics *in toto*—i.e. when it cancels redistribution politics from the agenda (what

Fraser (2000:108) calls "*the problem of displacement*"), or when it is applied to injustices that are not recognition injustices (such as the fundamental class injustice, namely the exploitation of surplus labour).

That these are the central problems in the hegemonic contemporary political thinking has been argued by Michaels. Just like Fraser, he claims that our epoch is characterized by the transformation of all politics into identity politics, and that this has turned socialist politics into something virtually unthinkable (Michaels 2004:24). This is why he (Michaels 2004:17) argues that the contemporary focus on culture and identity has become "a primary technology for disarticulating difference from inequality." Michaels (2004:22) also points out that the privileging of the category identity has resulted in that what to the Marxist may look like "class differences produced by capitalism," often appear like "differences between 'groups'." Or, to put it differently: that class is understood as an identity.<sup>5</sup>

Like Fraser, Michaels (2004:17) argues for an analytical distinction between class injustice and cultural injustice: "The difference between these problematics is [...] essential, since insofar as exploitation is at the core of class difference, class difference is ineluctably linked to inequality, where cultural difference, of course, is not." But unlike Fraser he doesn't make any attempts to find analogies between class-injustice and the economic injustices suffered by identity-collectivities. For this, he has been criticized by Michael Rothberg (2006: 307-308). Although Rothberg "fully subscribe[s]" to Michaels' insistence on "the importance of the analytic distinction between class and other social identities," he also accuses him of repeating "an ossifying opposition among culture, politics, and economics." As an alternative way of understanding the relationship between classes and collectivities based on identities, Rothberg proposes Fraser's "multidimensional map of class and status attuned to the different kinds of difference represented by race, gender, sexuality, and economic class." Given the fact that this map doesn't consistently uphold the distinction between classes and identity-collectivities, I want to argue that Michaels' insistence on the fundamental

5 Michaels elaborates on this in 2006a and 2006b.

difference between class and identity represents a better starting point for the theorization of the problems in “postsocialist” political thinking.<sup>6</sup>

A potentially more interesting critique of Michaels’ theory about “posthistoricism” than the one put forward by Rothberg is, however, that he too easily dismisses questions about recognition politics. And this is indeed a point where Fraser could be seen as an important source of inspiration. In “Rethinking Recognition” she argues that one of the main political problems with the “postsocialist” political claims-making is “*the problem of reification*” of collective identities (2000:108). And it is with regard to this problem—which could also be conceptualized as *cultural othering*—that her distinction between transformative and affirmative remedies for cultural injustice is vital for a radical theorization of recognition politics. In fact, I would like to argue that such a theorization could benefit greatly from a reformulation of the redistribution-recognition as a transformation-affirmation dilemma.

The dilemma faced by feminists, as well as by others struggling against injustices of recognition under the epoch of “postsocialism” is namely related to conflicts arising from the different effects for group differentiation inherent in transformative and affirmative attitudes to identities, rather than the differences between transformative redistribution and affirmative recognition. This becomes visible in Fraser’s description (1997:22) of “the antiracist version of the redistribution-recognition dilemma”: “How can antiracists fight simultaneously to abolish ‘race’ and to valorize the cultural specificity of subordinated racialized groups?” This formulation follows a long

description of how race, like gender, is a two-dimensional collectivity, with both “political-economic” and “cultural-valuational” dimensions, and thus requires both recognition and redistribution. But what above all makes it interesting is that “the antiracist version of the redistribution-recognition dilemma” bears a striking resemblance to another dilemma, repeatedly formulated in theories about multiculturalism and identity politics. A typical example of this is given by Seyla Benhabib (1999:405):

Many practitioners of cultural studies and many advocates of group-differentiated rights [...] accept that identity categories are fluid, variable, historically contested and constructed. Yet cultural studies theorists also embrace the moral and political proposition that it is just as fair, morally right and politically desirably to increase gender, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, sexual diversity in most major institutions of society. While rejecting cultural essentialism strategically, they are often committed to it “politically.”

This dilemma—which arises from a conflict between a transformative and an affirmative attitude toward an identity—of course becomes especially pressing in relation to identities which in themselves are oppressive. “Race” is such an identity, because there simply are no human races, and because every historical discourse about race has been saturated in what Paul Gilroy (2000:11-12) calls “raciology,” i.e. “the lore that brings the virtual realities of ‘race’ to dismal and destructive life.” (See also Darder and Torres 2004; Miles 1989.) Thus a politics aiming at recognition for the cultural injustices suffered by racialized collectivities is best undertaken from a transformative perspective. But the transformation-affirmation dilemma also has a strong bearing on collectivities constituted by factors such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality, ability etc. Whether recognition for these identities is best achieved by way of affirmation or transformation is not something I wish to go into here. But I do want to argue that Fraser’s distinction between the two versions of recognition politics (transformative and affirmative) is vital for the formulation of a radical politics aiming at ending cultural injustice, since it both highlights the risk that the affirmative recognition politics associated

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6 Another argument in Rothberg’s (2006:308) response to Michaels, namely that his definition of class difference “misses the essence of a Marxist critique of capitalism, which does not concern amounts of money but relations of production and exploitation,” is more interesting. Even if this criticism is too far-reaching for me to take on in this article, I would like to point out that the tendency to conflate the difference between rich and poor with class antagonism has recently been commented upon by Michael Zweig (2007: 173): “We need to change the understanding of class [...], going from the division of ‘rich and poor’ to the division of ‘worker and capitalist.’”

with mainstream multiculturalism may result in cultural othering, and opens up for the formulation of an alternative—transformative—strategy for remedying such injustices.

### Recognition and Status

Fraser's inability to uphold the distinction between classes and identity-based collectivities—as well as the importance of upholding it—becomes all the more urgent in the light of the development of her theory after the publication of "From Redistribution to Recognition?"

One of the developments in Fraser's work is the insistence that recognition injustice should be conceptualized as "a question of social status" (Fraser 2000:113). The greatest advantage of this approach is that it makes it easier to theorize the links between cultural and economic injustices. When recognition injustices are regarded in terms of status subordination, it becomes next to impossible to ignore their links to different kinds of discrimination and, thus, to economic injustices.

Another development in Fraser's later work is that she now insists that virtually all collectivities—including classes—are two-dimensional (Fraser 2003:23). This claim, which can be seen as a more or less logical consequence of the insistence on the interimbrication of recognition injustice and redistribution injustice, also has distinct advantages. One of these is that it can help make it visible that people subjected to exploitation often suffer recognition injustices as well as economic injustices.<sup>7</sup>

The main problem with these developments, however, is that they produce a picture of economic injustice which is at least as rigid as the one produced in "From Redistribution to Recognition?" This rigidity is the result of Fraser's inability to distinguish between the economic consequences of status subordination and the economic effects of class exploitation, which in turn is a product of her inability to uphold the distinction between classes and identity-collectivities.

Fraser's claim that classes are two-dimensional collectivities of course means that she now (Fraser 2003:49) rejects the Marxian conception of class: "Unlike Marxist theory [...] I do not conceive class as a relation to the means of production. In my conception, rather, class is an order of objective subordination derived from economic arrangements." It is with the point of departure in this definition that Fraser now claims that both "gender and 'class' implicate class structure." My main objection to this claim is—as has been argued above—that the economic injustices suffered by identity-collectivities such as gender and "race" are not, ultimately, rooted in the economic, but rather in the cultural structure of society. But Fraser's claim also brings another potential problem to the fore, namely that her reluctance to distinguish between the economic injustice suffered by exploited classes and those injustices suffered by identity-based collectivities risks reifying the phenomenon "dominance." This is a problem that has been discussed by Resnick and Wolff (1989:113), who criticize theorists who treat "dominance" as "the 'primary concept' of social relations," and demote class to "merely the term for the economic locus of dominance that occurs elsewhere in society as well." To avoid this reification of "dominance" an analytical distinction should be made between the economic injustice generated in class processes and the economic injustices caused by cultural processes (e.g. status subordination, suffered by people belonging to exploited classes as well as identity-collectivities).

Interestingly enough this claim seems to find at least some support in Fraser (2000:111), who argues that contemporary capitalism is characterized by an, at least partial, decoupling of economic mechanisms of distribution from cultural patterns of value and prestige. This idea, which has its roots in Marx and Engels' argument in *The Communist Manifesto* (1973:37) that the bourgeoisie has "left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'," is spelled out in an enlightening way by Hennessy (2006:389):

It is important to remember that capitalism does not require any particular cultural values to assemble its labor force and accumulate surplus value. It carries out a modernizing part that is

<sup>7</sup> A good example of how the conceptualization of recognition injustice as status subordination in combination with an interest in the cultural dimensions of class oppression can generate ground-breaking research can be found in Skeggs 1997.

fundamentally amoral, pursuing profit by tracking down surplus labor however and wherever it can. This may mean taking advantage of traditional cultural forms or symbolic values that civil society has upheld or melting them away so that subjects and new forms come to be.

When combined with the insistence that recognition injustice, conceptualized as status subordination, can cause economic injustice, this insight constitutes a reminder that the fact that a certain collectivity suffers economic injustice should not lead to the conclusion that these injustices are rooted in the economic infrastructure of capitalism. Thus it can be used to understand why not all women do domestic work, have low-income jobs or make less money than men with the same occupation, as well as why not everyone belonging to a racialized minority is subjected to exploitation, deprivation or marginalization. But this insight, of course, has to be coupled with the equally important insight that not all economic injustices suffered by identity collectives are products of status subordination.

It is an indisputable fact that a disproportionately high share of people belonging to racialized groups are members of the working class. This is something that Zweig (2007:178-179) has recently felt compelled to remind us about:

Class differences now divide ethnic and racial populations in ever more important ways. Although blacks and Hispanics are disproportionately found more often in the working class and less often in the middle and capitalist classes, compared with their shares of the labor force (and in lower-paying jobs in all classes compared with whites), there are nevertheless millions of black and Hispanic professionals, managers, and small business owners, and growing numbers in the corporate elite as well. Each class is divided by race and ethnicity; each race and ethnic group is divided by class.

The fact that classes are divided along identity-lines, and identities along class-lines, does not, however, necessitate the merging of the categories identity and class. On the contrary, it accentuates the need for an analytical distinction between the economic injustices suffered by classes and identity-collectivities respectively.

The inability to uphold this distinction constitutes the main problem in Fraser's (1997:12) attempt to formulate a defense of "those versions of the cultural politics of difference that can be coherently combined with the social politics of equality." In "Rethinking Recognition" she argues that there are two kinds of identity politics, both of which are problematic because they "tend to displace struggles for redistribution:"

The first current casts misrecognition as a problem of cultural depreciation. The roots of injustice are located in demeaning representations, but these are not seen as socially grounded. For this current, the nub of the problem is free-floating discourses, not *institutionalized* significations and norms. Hypostatizing culture, they both abstract misrecognition from its institutional matrix and obscure its entwinement with distributive justice. [...]

A second current of identity politics does not simply ignore maldistribution in this way. It appreciates that cultural injustices are often linked to economic ones, but misunderstands the character of the links. Subscribing effectively to a "culturalist" theory of contemporary society, proponents of this perspective suppose that maldistribution is merely a secondary effect of misrecognition. [2000:110-111]

I agree with Fraser's criticism of the version of identity politics that deals only with culture. But I cannot subscribe to her criticism of the second version of identity politics. When explaining the problem with this approach Fraser (2000:111) gives the following example: "Thus, class oppression is a superstructural effect of the cultural devaluation of proletarian identity (or, as one says in the United States, of 'classism')." But this criticism is valid only if the distinction between classes and identity-based collectivities is not upheld. For, while Fraser's criticism is certainly applicable to a culturalist understanding of classes, it is not relevant in relation to identity politics in general, since the economic effects of status subordination suffered by identity-collectivities *are* "a secondary effect of misrecognition."

Furthermore, Fraser could be accused of making exactly the same mistake that she identifies in the first version of culturalist identity politics, namely to "cast misrecognition as a problem of cultural

depreciation.” For despite her ambition to connect recognition injustices with injustices of redistribution by way of defining the former in terms of status subordination, the account she gives of the relationship between these two phenomena in “Rethinking recognition” is based on a fairly rigid binary division:

For the recognition dimension [...] the associated injustice is misrecognition. For the redistributive dimension [...] the corresponding injustice is maldistribution, in which economic structures, property regimes or labor markets deprive actors of the resources needed for full participation. Each dimension [...] corresponds to an analytically distinct form of subordination: the recognition dimension corresponds [...] to status subordination, rooted in institutionalized patterns of cultural value; the distributive dimension, in contrast, corresponds to economic subordination, rooted in structural features of the economic system. [2000:117]

But if the difference between classes and other kinds of collectivities, as I argue, is that the economic injustices the former is subjected to is a product of exploitation, whereas the other derives from status problems rooted primarily in cultural processes, then this distinction has to be reformulated. From this perspective, maldistribution can very well be viewed as the product of misrecognition, understood as status subordination. And this means that *recognition* might indeed be the appropriate remedy for some forms of economic injustice.

Fraser (2003:83), interestingly enough acknowledges this possibility, when discussing the concept cross-redressing: “This means using measures associated with one dimension of justice to remedy inequities associated with the other—hence using distributive measures to redress misrecognition and recognition measures to redress maldistribution.” When combined with the insistence on an analytical distinction between classes and identity-collectivities, this provides a solid foundation for the formulation of a truly radical politics in the “postsocialist” age that Fraser set out to formulate.

## Conclusion

Fraser’s theory can indeed be subjected to the critique of contemporary left thinking formulated by Resnick and Wolff (2005a:36), since it does not recognize “the specificity of exploitation and its social effects.” Nevertheless, Fraser’s analysis of the conditions for contemporary radical politics is compelling.

First of all, her analytical distinction between redistribution and recognition is vital for the theoretical understanding of the relationship between a socialist and “postsocialist” understanding of politics. It is, in fact, when this distinction isn’t upheld—as in Fraser’s analysis of the redistribution-recognition dilemma—that her theory becomes problematic. When it is upheld, on the other hand, it can help identifying the appropriate remedies for injustices specific to different kinds of collectivities.

Redistribution and recognition injustices are, as Fraser argues, often interimbricated. The working class is, for example, subjected to both economic and cultural injustices, and the same is true for identity-based collectivities such as gendered or racialized groups. This becomes visible when cultural injustice is conceptualized as status subordination. But this insight cannot be used as an excuse to do away with the distinction between classes and identities, since this would obscure that both the economic and cultural injustices suffered by classes are rooted in the societal organization of “the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus” (Resnick and Wolff 2002:xi), whereas the injustices suffered by identity-collectivities have their roots primarily in cultural processes.

This difference has political consequences, in that it points out the need for different kinds of remedies for the injustices suffered by different kinds of collectivities. Whereas classes should demand transformative redistribution, identity-collectivities should demand recognition.

The nature of the recognition remedies needed by different kinds of identity based collectivities cannot, however, be decided without analysis of both the nature of the collectivities, and the political circum-

stances. This is acknowledged by Fraser (2000:115), who argues that the appropriate remedies for cultural injustices depend

on what precisely the subordinated parties need in order to be able to participate as peers in social life. In some cases, they may need to be unburdened of excessive ascribed or constructed distinctiveness; in others, to have hitherto underacknowledged distinctiveness taken into account. In still other cases, they may need to shift the focus onto dominant or advantaged groups, outing the latter's distinctiveness, which has been falsely parading as universal; alternatively, they may need to deconstruct the very terms in which attributed differences are currently elaborated.

None of these versions of recognition politics constitutes a problem for the formulation of a socialist politics, as long as the distinction between classes and identity-collectivities is upheld. The only threat to the struggle for socialism posed by identity politics is, namely, that classes are treated as if they were identities. Hence, the main task for socialist theorists striving to identify and defend "those versions of the cultural politics of difference that can be coherently combined with the social politics of equality" is to uphold the distinction between classes and identity-collectivities. Given that this distinction is upheld, socialists have every reason to support recognition politics. For, as Fraser (1997:12) points out, "justice today requires *both* redistribution *and* recognition."

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