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WHO IS AFRAID OF FEMINISM? MISRECOGNITION AND THE POLITICS OF ACTIVE IGNORANCE

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Introduction

Una giustizia a due dimensioni. Redistribuzione e riconoscimento nell'opera di Nancy Fraser includes an introduction and seven chapters written by Anna Cavaliere. In all, this is an excellent work that plumbs the dimensions of redistribution, recognition, and political representation in Nancy Fraser's theory of justice in light of the changes that have occurred with the rise of neoliberal globalisation. In this note on Cavaliere's book, I will focus my comments on selected chapters to address two interrelated issues. In the first section, I build on Nikolas Kompridis's critique of Fraser's standard of publicity to highlight the role of active ignorance in defining what merits the title of injustice. In the second section, I take my cue from Fraser's critique of second-wave feminism to shed light on the conceptual hostility that actively distorts feminist claims and weakens their transformative power.

Misrecognition and the Will Not to Know

> People are willing to think about many things. What people refuse to do, or are not permitted to do, or resist doing, is to change the way they think.
> Andrea Dworkin (1976, p. 202)

For Fraser, misrecognition is a matter of status subordination. It is "a matter of *externally manifest* and *publicly verifiable* impediments to some people's standing as full members of society" (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 31, emphasis added). This means that not all

that is experienced as injustice counts as *valid* misrecognition. In Fraser and Honneth's view, we need to distinguish what *truly* deserves the title of injustice from what is *merely experienced* as such, and, in doing so, we must reject appeals to an independent realm of subjective experience that cannot be publicly verified (2003, p. 205). What we require are decentralised and depersonalised discourses of justice and social critique that offer an *objective standpoint* for evaluating recognition—a standpoint that is not "sheltered from public contestation," but rather subjected to "critical scrutiny in open debate" (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 205).

The Canadian philosopher Nikolas Kompridis (2007) finds Fraser's distinction between what merits the title of injustice and what is merely experienced as injustice "quite worrisome" and discusses some questionable assumptions underlying Fraser's standard of publicity (Cavaliere, 2023, pp. 65–73). To begin with, *contra* Fraser, Kompridis considers subjective experience as an irreplaceable and necessary *source of intelligibility* and claims that successful identification of misrecognition must pass through both subjective experience and subjectless discourses. Indeed, if we leave "the suffering subject" aside, we risk making the content of subjectless discourses empty and alienating.

The importance accorded to subjective experience also leads Kompridis (2007) to be sceptical of the assumption that currently available claims-making vocabularies and subjectless discourses are all the vocabularies and discourses we need to express and justify recognition claims. Acknowledging that misrecognition may not take an already familiar public form, Kompridis (2007) holds that we should be wary of placing faith in standards of public verification that assume the adequacy of inherited vocabularies of identity. In Kompridis' (2007) words, "we cannot presume the justificatory adequacy of our current discourses and vocabularies," and "subjective experience must always be an ineliminable normative reference point of resistance, contestation, and transformation".

Finally, Kompridis disagrees with the assumption that recognition claims are fully explicit and determinate claims. Taking a distance from Fraser's positivist reading of recognition, he argues that recognition claims are indeterminate claims interwoven with our identities and the various goods we associate with them. Hence, he emphasises that in order to *turn* what is "merely experienced as injustice" into what rightly deserves the title of injustice, it is necessary to overcome those social, linguistic, and semantic barriers that exacerbate such indeterminacy by rendering those suffering injustice "literally and figuratively speechless" (2007, p. 282).

Each of Kompridis' concerns has long been shared by philosophers of language and social epistemologists interested in the way speech and knowledge are produced and

constrained along axes of power. The common assumption is that the success of a speaker's attempt to communicate ultimately depends upon the audience.

This means that individuals are deeply vulnerable to others in the exercise of their linguistic and epistemic agency. In ordinary speech situations, speakers can go wrong, and they can *be wronged* in various ways, on account of the way others take up their speech. In line with Kompridis' critique, theories of *silencing* and *discursive injustice* show that the ability to control the performative force of one's speech directly correlates with social power, and it is often the case that people who belong to marginalised or stigmatised groups struggle to be heard.[1]

Consider the case of the anger voiced by women as a reaction to gender injustices. In her classic paper *Anger and the Politics of Naming,* Naomi Scheman (1993) argues that women's anger is a rational response to facts about their situation and a communicative act that demands social recognition and action. Despite this, women's emotional speech acts are often taken as mere expressions of feelings rather than as epistemic claims with normative content (Kukla, 2014). In Scheman's (1993) view, women's emotional reactions are often taken as "irrational or nonrational storms. They sweep over us and are wholly personal, quite possibly hormonal. The emotions that fit with this picture tend to be diffuse, like moods, or episodic and undirected. They don't, in any event, *mean* anything" (p. 25). Because of their emotional nature and the defective uptake they receive as a result, women's speech acts of protestation are often neutralised: the communicative acts of denouncing and contesting gender oppression are treated as non-truth-bearing speech acts that have no generalised epistemic consequences for others and make no political demands.

The silencing of protesting voices is a ubiquitous occurrence, demonstrating that having the concepts and terms to articulate an injustice does not guarantee social uptake.

Whereas Kompridis focuses on the subject who attempts to articulate the wrong suffered, I would like to draw attention to the role of the *active ignorance* of the recipients of recognition claims. I borrow the term from theorists of the epistemology of ignorance (Medina, 2013, 2016; Mills, 1997; Tuana, 2006).

Ignorance in the realm of science is typically depicted as nothing more than the absence of true belief or the presence of false belief. Thus, for instance, a person might be

[1] The notion of *silencing* has been developed within speech act theory by Jennifer Hornsby and Rae Langton (see Hornsby & Langton, 1998; Langton, 1993). The notion of *discursive injustice* has been developed by Quill Kukla (2014). On epistemic silencing, see Fricker (2007).

ignorant of many mathematical truths because he has never studied mathematics. Active ignorance, instead, is not merely "something we do not (yet) know" (Tuana, 2006, p. 3). Rather, it is the kind of recalcitrant ignorance that is deeply invested in not knowing (Medina, 2016, p. 182). In the case of active ignorance, besides epistemic gaps and distortions, there are also self-protecting mechanisms—psychological and social—that sustain ignorance by making it immune to criticisms and neutralising possible conflicting beliefs. For example, the *will not to know* about one's complicity in racism might bring one to distort claims about racist discrimination as personal attacks that call for defensive reactions, or as attempts to be divisive that should be met with contempt (Medina, 2016, p. 182).[2] Similarly, when one is interested in not knowing that many of the achievements one takes credit for were in part made possible by one's unearned privileges, one might prefer self-deception and wishful thinking to uncomfortable truths.

As social theorists have shown, active ignorance is one of the mechanisms that distorts powerful groups' understanding of the social world. Indeed, although socially powerful groups are privileged in many respects, it is not always the case that they have a better understanding of social reality than marginalised groups. On the contrary, active ignorance is often the product of an epistemic agreement among dominant social groups "about what counts as a correct, *objective* interpretation of the world" and entails *miscognitions* that turn illusory perceptions about society's functioning into *objective truth*s (Mills, 1998, p. 28). In *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills calls this phenomenon "white ignorance," disclosing an epistemology of ignorance that serves to stabilise aspects of racism in Europe and the United States (Mills, 1997).[3]

Epistemologies of ignorance have provided the important insight that, in order to promote greater justice, we must not only transform inherited vocabularies and discourses but also remove the *cognitive* and *affective* barriers that block their acquisition and usage in publicly defining what deserves the title of injustice (Medina, 2016, p. 201). In my view, the issues raised by Kompridis regarding the centrality of subjective experience and the struggle to articulate injustice could be effectively addressed by unmasking the patterns of ignorance that actively shape the boundaries of what is considered 'political.' In order to "expand our field of action" (Kompridis, 2007, p. 281), we must carefully examine how active ignorance places limits on what can be known, what can be said, what really *matters*, and what is objectively unjust. Moreover, in order to "change the

[2] Nancy Tuana (2006) refers to ignorance sustained by the will not to know under the term "willful ignorance."

[3] Charles Mills's notion of "white ignorance" sheds light on the doxastic system that produces ignorance denying white privilege (see Mills 1997, 1998). Mills' account of white ignorance, as Mills acknowledges, is closely related to feminist standpoint theory, which in turn has Marxist roots (Mills, 2013).

protocols of public reason" (Cavaliere, 2023, p. 73), we need to counter the protective mechanisms of privilege and heed others. This "ethics of discomfort" (Medina, 2016) is what we need to understand feminist demands.

Embracing Feminism

> I and many of my sisters do not see the world as being so simple. And perhaps that is why we have not rushed to create abstract theories.
> Barbara Christian (1988, p. 76)

In Chapter 5, titled "Neoliberalismo, femminismo, progressismo," Cavaliere (2023) refers to an article published by *The Guardian* in 2013, in which Fraser argues that "feminism has become the handmaiden of neoliberalism." Drawing on her own work in political theory, Fraser claims that second-wave feminist criticism of the welfare-state's paternalist logics, together with the later "cultural turn" in feminism, and the rise of identity politics, have unwittingly contributed to the legitimisation of neoliberal policies. Referring to the feminist struggles for recognition, she states that "the feminist turn to identity politics dovetailed all too neatly with a rising neoliberalism that wanted nothing more than to repress all memory of social equality" (Fraser, 2013).

Fraser's (2022) critique reminds us that "cannibal capitalism" can hollow out or distort fundamental political claims and offers compelling arguments to mobilise feminists on the left against neoliberal policies. That said, her reading obliterates much of what feminism is and what feminism *does*. 'Feminism' was a practice long before it was a theory, and decades of activism, dispute, and negotiation produced a constellation of imaginaries and methodologies. By abstracting the second-wave feminism from its historical and social context to present it as a transnational universal experience, Fraser depicts an oversimplified picture. In response to Fraser, Brenna Bhandar and Denise Ferreira da Silva (2013) point out that her claims are based on the erasure of black, subaltern, and third-world feminist strands. In a concise but compelling way, the authors show that Fraser's framework of analysis is flawed for it does not take into account "the work of A. Y. Davis, Audre Lorde, Himani Bannerji, Avtar Brah, Selma James, Maria Mies, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Silvia Federici, Dorothy Roberts," all of whom, as the authors rightly empathise, "have consistently developed critiques of capitalist forms of property, exchange, paid and unpaid labour, along with culturally embedded and structural forms of patriarchal violence" (Bhandar & Silva, 2013). In a similar vein, Leticia Sabsay (2014) points out that "the opposition between cultural

recognition and social redistribution struggles only works among privileged white positionalities, since for racialised populations and in postcolonial contexts recognition has been an egalitarian claim from the beginning" (p. 326). Moreover, as remarked by Ozlem Aslan and Zeynep Gambetti (2011), when Fraser reproaches feminism for turning to identity politics and absolutising the critique of cultural sexism, she overlooks the fact that neoconservatism is the rejection of the ground obtained by feminists in the domains of family, sexuality, and such bodily rights as abortion (Aslan & Gambetti, 2011, p. 141).[4] Reactionary backlash shows that feminism, anti-racist, and LGBTQIA+ liberation movements can actually stand against the system and confirms that the struggles for recognition and self-determination are means of eliminating oppression *in all its forms* (Young, 1997).

So, is it really the case that feminists have become the "handmaidens of neoliberalism" because they abandoned emancipatory ideals in favour of cultural interests, as Fraser suggests? To answer this question, we should begin by discarding the monolithic conception of feminism offered by Fraser and go back to the rough ground of our actual practices by making good use of existing "cartographies of struggles" (Mohanty, 1991).[5] It is in this spirit that I shift the focus to another question: given our different positionalities, *how* can we counteract those socio-political and epistemological mechanisms that actively weaken feminism's transformative power?

If it is true that feminist emancipatory ideals engulfed by neoliberal capitalism can be turned into "mere slogans" (Cavaliere, 2023, p. 77), it should also be emphasised that feminist claims are systematically silenced, neglected, distorted, or wilfully resisted in every social environment shaped by patriarchal norms, including social milieus within the left. This is not news. The testimonies of leftist feminist militants, politicians, and scholars reveal that feminist issues have always been regarded as apolitical and, when related to sex, reproduction, and marriage, were publicly condemned for producing "a scandalous inversion in the relation between culture and life, social history and personal history" (Melandri, 2021, p. 268).[6] It is Fraser herself who testifies to the scant attention of her New Left comrades to gender issues. In a passage that Cavaliere quotes in the introduction to her essay, Fraser and Nicholson (1989) write:

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[4] Aslan and Gambetti's critique refers to Fraser's book *Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History* (2009).

[5] In *Feminism for the 99 per cent. A manifesto* (2019), written by Cinzia Azzurra, Nancy Fraser, and Tithi Bhattacharya, the "handmaiden of neoliberalism," is identified with liberal feminism.

[6] Carla Lonzi (1970/2023), in *Sputiamo su Hegel*, writes that "we see in the apoliticality of the traditional woman the spontaneous response to a universe of ideologies and claims where her problems emerge only starkly when, from the heights of paternalism, she is questioned as a mass of manoeuvre (p. 39).

> When, in the 1960s, women in the New Left began to extend prior talk about "women's rights" into the more encompassing discussion of "women's liberation," they encountered the fear and hostility of their male comrades and the use of Marxist political theory as a support for these reactions. Many men of the New Left argued that gender issues were secondary because they were subsumable under more basic modes of oppression, namely, class and race. (pp. 92–93)

What Fraser and Nicholson describe here seems to be a paradigmatic example of active (self-protecting) ignorance: men of the New Left presumably lacked important pieces of knowledge to recognise the claims that feminists were making. They could have asked their feminist comrades to teach them how to grasp the reality of gender oppression. Instead, their fear and hostility led them to paternalistically use the authority of Marxist political theory to obscure the politics of sexism. One might wonder if this kind of conceptual hostility is encountered by feminists also today, and the response to this question would be *yes*. People tend to avoid thinking about gender oppression, and sometimes deny its very existence (MacKinnon, 2005, p. 18). Moreover, intellectual arrogance and paternalistic attitudes towards feminist claims are prevalent in all walks of life. When expressed with scorn and mockery by men in positions of authority in culture and politics, they have a profoundly influential impact on public opinion.[7] This brings us to the dimension of *representation*: how can feminist actors included in the political community reshape the rules of the political game? Which issues are still excluded, relegated to the private sphere? Which words are allowed, and which are denied? Can we legitimately say that we live in a patriarchal society? And if not, why?

All these questions relate to one of the greatest difficulties feminists face in dealing with the abstraction of critical theory and the authoritarian qualities of culture: overcoming the traditional opposition between private and public in order to demonstrate that *the personal is political*. Through consciousness-raising, women discovered that gender relations are a collective fact, no more simply personal than class relations (MacKinnon, 1982, p. 543). Lived experience became a "criterion of meaning" (Collins, 1990), and feminists collectively struggled for the overcoming of the traditional opposition between 'private' and 'public' that had historically excluded them from the *polis*. Feminist theorist Lea Melandri, in her 1977 essay *L'infamia originaria*, writes that the search for circularity and synthesis between the personal and the political, artificially separated, seems to be the last shore beyond which, either a new way of existing

[7] For an account of intellectual arrogance, see Tanesini (2016).

politically is born, or politics itself as a collective project of liberation dies. Nowadays, feminists are doing an excellent job of publicly unmasking the politics of patriarchal violence, and important milestones have been achieved—from the streets to the supreme courts. However, the transversal tendency to neglect, misrepresent, or wilfully resist feminist knowledge and practices confirms the existence of pernicious bodies of active ignorance that need to be addressed.

Feminists have opened paths of action for others to follow. If we are willing to stand in solidarity with feminists, then we must do more than just *let* them speak. We have to resist conceptual hostility and change the way we think, at the cost of feeling uncomfortable. In Medina's (2016) words,

> all of us (but those who occupy positions of privilege especially) need to get out of our comfort zones and familiar spaces and to open ourselves to the epistemic friction that can make perspectives vulnerable and accountable to each other. (p. 200)

Only such an ethos, I contend, can sustain and fuel the transformative power of feminist movements.

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