



## Emphasizing the Economic

Nancy Fraser, the Cultural-Redistributive Divide,  
and Social Justice's PR Crisis

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*The philosopher Nancy Fraser defines two paradigms for social justice: the economic and the cultural. These two paradigms often find themselves at odds (the familiar struggle between class politics and identity politics), but only when working in conjunction, according to Fraser, can they reach their emancipatory potential. Contra Fraser, this paper argues that there exist some historical moments in which it is necessary for one paradigm to take precedence over the other. In our current political moment, both the Right and the Left can be said to be fixated on culture, and this fixation ultimately disadvantages the Left: it appears as if the Right has already won the culture war, at least within the minds of a statistically significant portion of the American populace. Legal attempts to protect social justice seem similarly doomed. In order to persuade the public of the advantages of the movement, this paper argues that we must begin to emphasize its universal economic benefits.*

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**A**ccording to a recent poll, support for critical race theory (CRT) splits along party lines; 72% of Democrats support it in comparison to 16% of Republicans (Monmouth University Polling Institute 2021, 3). In contrast, when “politicized” language (i.e., “critical race theory”) was removed and replaced with the more neutral term “history of racism,” a majority of those polled (94% of Democrats and 54% of Republicans) favored teaching the subject in schools. This tension—between the generally popular aims of social justice and the ways these aims have been (mis)represented in right-wing media—makes the following clear: social justice has a PR problem.

The authors of the poll venture a similar diagnosis: “A negative visceral message can be very powerful in reframing an issue in the public’s mind” (3). In effect, it seems as if the

Right has already won the culture war. The question then becomes the following: Is there a way to change the cultural narrative surrounding CRT, to reorient the public toward a



more honest accounting of what social justice represents in actuality? This article, while not presented as a total curative, asserts that framing social justice as an economic issue (as opposed to a cultural issue) might be an effective way to rehabilitate the subject in the mind of certain segments of the American public.

### How Did We Get Here?

The legal definition of what constitutes free speech has always been slippery, coming under revision during various moments in our history, including in *People v. Ruggles* (1811), which established a legal precedent for prosecuting blasphemy (Dodd 1985). In the 1900s, a flurry of court cases complicated the First Amendment further, reaching a sort of culmination in *Miller v. California* (1971), in which “the Court ruled that community standards and state statutes that describe sexual depictions . . . could be used to prosecute . . . individuals” for obscenity (American Library Association 2017, par. 75). To this day, the definition of obscenity consists of three parts:

First, the average person, applying contemporary community standards, must find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to prurient interests; second, that it depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct as defined by state law; and third, that the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value. (par. 75)

One can imagine how this interpretation can (and has) been abused, especially when considering the third part of the definition, as it relies heavily on subjective criteria such as “literary” and “political.” Although no legal challenge has yet to successfully win using this line of reasoning, it is important to acknowledge that such cases have existed throughout history, and that the same nebulous terms often underly the arguments of those seeking to ban books in the present day (Natanson 2022).

Sometimes the attacks on free speech take on extra-legal qualities. This is to say, in conjunction with legal challenges, those who wish to restrict speech often seek to simultaneously co-opt the cultural conversation. The end goal is to limit what is sayable in any given social situation and, in many instances, to restrict the ways individuals can publicly identify. One can recall the Lavender Scare, a 1950s movement that weaponized cultural sentiment against homosexuality, leading to termination of many government employees (Johnson 2009). The important thing to note is that the Lavender Scare, itself an offshoot of the equally suspect Army-McCarthy hearings (Schrecker 2006), represented a merging of legal lines of attack and cultural lines

of attack; in this case, a cultural argument (homosexuality is “anti-American”) needed to exist to justify the legal persecution of queer individuals.

The weaponization of both legal and cultural arguments effectively quells dissent. It is not surprising, then, that the modern Republican Party has returned to this American pastime, wielding the power of state legislatures while stoking a culture war against a new political bogeyman: social justice (Goldberg 2021; Schuessler 2021). In a nonexhaustive list, bills targeting CRT have been passed in or are up for a vote the following states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin (World Population Review 2022). Taking inspiration from the past, right-wing politicians bemoan the “anti-Americanness” of CRT, the ways it, in the words of Senator Ted Cruz, “views every conflict as a racial conflict” (Bolton 2022).

Of course, librarians across the country have fought—and continue to fight—this two-pronged assault on CRT and social justice. In the realm of culture, one can point to conversations happening daily across our profession, facilitated by organizations like Breaking Library Silos for Social Justice (BLS4SJ) (Austin Public Library, n.d.). On the legal end, the American Library Association’s Office of Intellectual Freedom works tirelessly to address book challenges and, in coordination with the Merritt Fund, offer financial support to library staff

[denied] employment rights because of defense of intellectual freedom; that is, threatened with loss of employment or discharged because of their stand for the cause of intellectual freedom, including promotion of freedom of the press, freedom of speech, the freedom of librarians to select items for their collections from all the world’s written and recorded information, and defense of privacy rights. (American Library Association 2021, par. 3)

One cannot overemphasize the importance of these conversations and resources. Yet the evidence is irrefutable: half of the country remains unpersuaded of social justice’s benefits. We find ourselves in a divided America, where it seems as if the cultural conversation has effectively been won by an insurgent Right. They have a PR line that resonates, that turns people *away* from social justice, or at least away from its culturally transformative promises. Is there a way to bring these people back? Can the Left manufacture a PR line that transcends both the cultural and legal questions altogether? These are the questions to which this paper will now turn.



### Fraser's Cultural-Redistributive Divide

To better understand what we mean by “social justice,” it will be necessary to define the concept further. The work of the philosopher Nancy Fraser has been particularly useful in providing a framework for the present discussion; she asserts that there are two paradigms through which we can understand social justice: one in which it functions as a project of “recognition” (*cultural social justice*) and one in which it functions as a project of “economic justice” (*redistributive social justice*) (Fraser 1998). The proponents of each paradigm, Fraser is quick to note, often frame them as inherently antagonistic. We, the political activists, are then “asked to choose between class politics and identity politics, social democracy and multiculturalism, redistribution and recognition” (4).

This observation might seem commonplace today; many theorists and writers have explored the contentious relationship between identity politics and class politics (Gimenez 2006; Walters 2018). One could say, nonetheless, that the question is central to Leftist thought; Marx, at the very least, implicitly recognizes the existence of the two paradigms in his writings on the base (i.e., economic relations between men) and the superstructure (i.e., cultural and legal relations) (Williams 1973).

What makes Fraser's approach different than other critiques, however, is that she believes that the cultural-redistributive divide presents a false dichotomy. A true commitment to social justice, in her view, requires both cultural and redistributive elements. Going forward, the goal of social justice is to create a framework that incorporates both the cultural and the economic:

As soon as one embraces this thesis [the cultural-redistributive divide], however, the question of how to combine them becomes paramount. I contend that the emancipatory aspects of the two paradigms need to be integrated in a single, comprehensive framework. In this lecture, I consider two dimensions of this project. First, on the plane of moral philosophy, I propose an overarching conception of justice that can accommodate both defensible claims for social equality and defensible claims for the recognition of difference. Second, on the plane of social theory, I propose an approach that can accommodate the complex relations between interest and identity, economy and culture, class and status in contemporary globalizing capitalist society. (Fraser 1998, 4)

Fraser's argument leads her to a third term, *participation*, which is the synthesis of the two paradigms: “The normative core of my conception, which I have mentioned several times, is the notion of parity of participation. According to

this norm, justice requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers” (10). In essence, a society built on parity provides equal opportunities for all vis-à-vis participation in *both* the economic and cultural realms. Fraser seems to be incorporating insights from Marx, who also viewed economics and culture as mutually reinforcing structures (Lukes 1982). She might go a step further than Marx, however, when she claims that any movement that seeks to change the culture and the economy must, conceivably, address each one—simultaneously or in turn.

Fraser's arguments are clear and precise, and her conclusion is, in the opinion of this author, irrefutable. No political movement can hope to change the world by ignoring culture and focusing exclusively on economics (or vice versa). This is not this paper's argument. Rather, it seeks to answer the following question: when the pendulum has swung too far in one direction, as is the case in today's political climate, what can be done to return to a place where economic justice and cultural justice are on equal footing?

### Redistribution and the Universal

About 43% of the US population self-identifies as Republican (Jones 2022), but this technical minority holds a great deal of political influence because of how the Electoral College favors rural states (Wilson 2019). Furthermore, almost all Republicans reject social justice outright (Monmouth University Polling Institute 2021), meaning that the chance that social justice initiatives will receive any widespread implementation at the level of the state (outside of the ones already sympathetic to the message) is small. If some sort of legislature does pass on the federal level, it will be tenuous, under constant threat from incoming administrations.

It is unclear, too, how the Left could persuade Republicans to accept the cultural aims of social justice, especially when much of the Right's cultural project rests on the outright rejection of pluralism (one of the defining features of social justice) (Ansell 1997). The situation seems even more dire, moreover, when considering that these diametrically opposed cultural positions (sameness vs. difference, totalitarianism vs. multiculturalism) seem more and more like long-lasting fixtures of our political landscape (Brown and Mettler 2022). Two distinct cultures talking *at* each other, with no exchange of ideas. Laws being applied haphazardly, with no universal implementation. This is the political reality of our current moment. The need to create a different line of argument, one that cuts across sameness and difference without falling back on increasingly fragile legal arguments, becomes exceedingly clear.



What feels distinctly unusual in this moment, however, is the lack of a coordinated effort on the Left to make the argument for anything universal, let alone the type of unequivocal free speech laws or cultural arguments that would protect social justice in the classroom. Advocating for unrestricted speech, historically speaking, has been well within the Left's purview. This is most famously illustrated in the history of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which, until recently, held absolute free speech as a central tenet (Greenwald 2020). In the 70s, they even famously defended Nazis, not because they agreed with their viewpoints (they emphatically did not), but because free speech was seen by the organization as a universal right that extends to all political movements, even the deplorable. Whether unrestricted speech is a moral necessity or not is beside the point; the following is clear: the Left lacks a universal cultural project and needs a new locus around which to organize.

The universal has been the focus of a substantial amount of critical commentary. This paper's understanding of the term may be most influenced by Alain Badiou's inventive reading of St. Paul. In his exegeses on said reading, the scholar Delfo Canceran (2020) writes that

Paul is aware of the composition of the community. However, the new truth exceeds the evident difference that exists between these ethnic groups. We can only receive a new truth by going beyond such differences. This new situation does not mean that the people need to renounce their customs and practices. Instead, they become indifferent to the differences of one another so that they can build a new creation or new humanity. With this in mind, Paul seeks to reorient the members, not in relation to cultural specificities (ethnicity, status or gender), but in relation to truth. (105)

The truth this paper seeks to foreground is economic in nature. The unfair state of the economy has been the basis for numerous political moments in recent years: Occupy Wall Street, the Bernie Sanders Campaign, the election of Gabriel Boric in Chile. The premise that underlies them all is simple: the world is divided into two classes, one which holds most of the wealth, the other which holds a much smaller portion. Difference is not highlighted here. Rather, it is shared experience ("the ninety-nine percent") that sits at the forefront of these movements. This is a sameness, yes, but one that encompasses difference (unlike the right-wing variation discussed earlier); the ninety-nine percent includes people of color, queer people, the disabled. All of these minority groups (in addition to majority-White Republicans) face the same universal struggle.

We can already see the Democratic Party moving toward this economic universalism in their recent rhetoric. President Biden, a deeply controversial figure who is certainly not a committed Leftist by any measure (Savage 2021), included the following language in the press release for his student loan forgiveness program:

- Target relief dollars to low- and middle-income borrowers. The Department of Education estimates that, among borrowers who are no longer in school, nearly 90% of relief dollars will go to those earning less than \$75,000 a year. No individual making more than \$125,000 or household making more than \$250,000—the top 5% of incomes in the United States—will receive relief.
- Help borrowers of all ages. The Department of Education estimates that, among borrowers who are eligible for relief, 21% are 25 years and under and 44% are ages 26–39. More than a third are borrowers age 40 and up, including 5% of borrowers who are senior citizens. (The White House, par. 16–17)

We can see the attention paid to universal categories in this statement (i.e., the cancellation helps "borrowers of all ages," the cancellation excludes the "top 5% of income-earners"). The economic argument outlined above not only bypasses the cultural arguments, which fall prey to the difference and sameness dichotomy expertly weaponized by Republicans, but instead create a third category rooted in economic reality—the ninety-nine percent. Pessimists will point to the negative reaction to the forgiveness from the Republic establishment and even some Democrats (Douglas-Gabriel, Romm, and Stein 2022), but the point remains: the forgiveness points to a potential direction for the Left that avoids the pitfalls of previous legal and cultural defenses of social justice.

Fraser's synthesis of culture and the redistributive remain intact in this analysis; there is no need to abandon her framework for social justice. What is needed, however, is a strategic pause on the cultural front of the project, one that acknowledges its deep unpopularity (manufactured, of course, by the Right). The path to implementing social justice initiatives at a widespread scale might include pivoting, for a short time, to full and unequivocal embrace of the economic at the expense of the cultural.

## Conclusion

On both the legal and cultural front, the contemporary Right is attacking social justice. Passing legislation to protect CRT in schools will be limited geographically, while cultural



arguments can do little to persuade those with opinions mediated by the right-wing propaganda machine. Drawing from (and retooling) the work of Nancy Fraser, this article explores the cultural-redistributive divide and ultimately proposes a turn toward a universal economic message. The

argument is not that economics and culture need to be split permanently. Rather, the argument is that the Left might need to take a strategic pause when it comes engaging in the culture war and focus, instead, on producing a more radically redistributive ethos in the short term.

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