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http://doi.org/10.5007/1677-2954.2025.e106970

COUNTERPUBLICS, SUBALTERNITY, CONSERVATIVE CONTESTATION: POLITICAL CRISIS THROUGH NANCY FRASER'S EYES

CONTRAPÚBLICOS, SUBALTERNIDADE, CONTESTAÇÃO CONSERVADORA: A CRISE POLÍTICA AOS OLHOS DE NANCY FRASER

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the concept of counterpublic and considers its importance in the understanding of different political conflicts. First, I present Nancy Fraser's initial formulation of the concept in which she characterizes the more plural and counter-hegemonic features of new social movements – the subaltern counterpublics. After that, I consider a change in Fraser's diagnosis where the concept of counterpublic is tied to an ambiguity created by the consequences of progressive neoliberalism and the reactions of conservative groups to economic and political crises. The conclusion just underlines the specificity of critical-normative concepts, arguing that, in certain contexts, the concept of counterpublic meets the theoretical requirements necessary to contribute to the production of diagnoses of the present time.

Keywords: Counterpublics; Subalternity; Public Sphere; Conservative Populism; Critical Theory; Progressive Neoliberalism.

RESUMO

O artigo analisa o conceito de contrapúblico e considera sua importância na compreensão de diferentes conflitos políticos. Primeiramente, apresentamos a formulação inicial que Nancy Fraser deu ao conceito com o intuito de apresentar as características mais plurais e contra-hegemônicas dos novos movimentos sociais – os contrapúblicos subalternos. Em seguida, consideramos a mudança no diagnóstico de Fraser, fazendo com que o conceito de contrapúblico se torne ambíguo em virtude das consequências do neoliberalismo progressista e das reações de grupos conservadores às crises econômica e política. A conclusão se limita a ressaltar a especificidade de conceitos crítico-normativos, argumentando que, em certos contextos, o conceito de contrapúblico possui as exigências teóricas necessárias para contribuir com a produção de novos diagnósticos de tempo presente.

Palavras-chave: Contrapúblicos; Subalternidade; Esfera Pública; Populismo Conservador; Teoria Crítica; Neoliberalismo Progressista.

Introduction

Although Critical Theory encompasses a wide range of perspectives and approaches, one of its enduring and most intricate challenges lies in articulating the relationship between its normative categories and the interpretation of social reality. This tradition is marked by an ongoing tension between theoretical reflection and the need to remain responsive to historically situated forms of domination and resistance. The task of linking normative concepts to empirical social processes is not only philosophically demanding but also crucial for preserving the theory's critical edge. Indeed, the way Critical Theory engages with concrete social conditions fundamentally shapes its ability to diagnose injustices and contribute meaningfully to political transformation. Among the key concepts that have emerged in this context, the notion of *counterpublics* has generated a rich and growing body of scholarship. This concept has opened new paths for both theoretical and empirical research and has proven useful for analyzing a wide range of social and political phenomena. Building on this field of inquiry, this article seeks – albeit indirectly – to examine how critical and normative categories are grounded in and adapted to shifting contexts of political and social struggle.

To that end, I focus specifically on the development and uses of the concept of counterpublics, with particular attention to the contributions of Nancy Fraser. Her work has been foundational in shaping how the concept is understood and applied, and numerous subsequent debates have unfolded in response to her formulations. Fraser herself has returned to the concept to address changing political conjunctures, including the emergence of new feminist movements and the rise of conservative forces. My aim is to show that the critical potential of concepts like counterpublics depends on their capacity to respond to evolving configurations of social conflict and historical diagnosis.

I develop this argument in two main steps. First, I examine the initial formulation of the concept in Fraser's work, which aimed to capture the plural and counter-hegemonic dimensions of new social movements. In doing so, Fraser was attentive to a broader literature of historical revision that sought to reassess the significance of social movements organized around race, class, gender, and sexuality—movements often marginalized in earlier theoretical frameworks (I). Second, I analyze a shift in Fraser's diagnostic framework, in which the concept of counterpublics is less mobilized to illuminate the tensions and contradictions generated by "progressive neoliberalism" and the political and economic crises that followed. Although Fraser began to produce diagnoses of conservative social

contestations, this new perspective was not accompanied by an updating of the concept of counterpublics. While Fraser sought to understand the changing political landscape, including the rise of new feminist and conservative movements, her analysis made limited progress in elaborating the specific dynamics of what she herself identified as conservative or anti-democratic counterpublics. These formations challenge the initial, more implicitly emancipatory orientation of the concept. In this regard, other approaches – such as that developed by Michael Warner – have opened the way for a broader conceptual transposition, enabling the notion of counterpublics to account for political phenomena that do not fit neatly within a "subaltern" framework, including reactionary or exclusionary publics that nonetheless operate "outside", as it were, dominant discursive spaces (II). The article concludes with a brief reflection on the specificity of critical-normative concepts, arguing that, under certain historical and political conditions, counterpublic continues to meet the theoretical criteria necessary to contribute to socially grounded diagnoses (III).

I

In the history of critical theory, the richest concepts have been those capable of producing a broad and complex understanding of the challenges facing our societies. The vitality and analytical power of a concept depend not only on its internal coherence but also on its connections with other categories and its ability to illuminate the contradictions and transformations of its historical moment. The public sphere, for instance, is deeply intertwined with a variety of political and social categories – such as democracy, citizenship, power, and ideology – and thus reflects the aspirations, conflicts, and contradictions of specific historical and spatial contexts. Given this interdependence, how should we critically interrogate our fundamental concepts? Should we assess them based on their adaptability to shifting social realities, their capacity to expose hidden structures of domination, or their potential to envision alternative political futures? How is the concept of the public sphere fundamentally linked to broader political and social categories – such as democracy, citizenship, power, and ideology – while simultaneously reflecting the aspirations, conflicts, and contradictions of its historical and spatial contexts?

The public sphere operates as a mediating space between state and society, and its conceptual boundaries and functions are perpetually reconfigured by evolving power relations, cultural transformations, and technological innovations, which collectively determine its role in structuring democratic engagement, articulating dissent, and negotiating ideological

contestations. For this reason, when examining the field of dispute surrounding the concept, it becomes clear that few categories in political and social theory have received as much attention or undergone as many transformations as the public sphere (Strum, 1994; Grisprud, 2010). From its Enlightenment roots as a bourgeois arena of rational debate to its contemporary reimagining in digital and transnational spaces, the concept has been expanded and redefined to account for exclusions and new forms of collective action. This constant evolution underscores its centrality to debates about participation, representation, and the very nature of democratic life.

Originally hailed as a groundbreaking critical category, the concept of the public sphere – as theorized in Jürgen Habermas' seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) – has since faced significant critique for its perceived exclusions and limitations. While Habermas' historical and normative account established the public sphere as a vital space for rational-critical debate and democratic deliberation, later scholars challenged its idealized vision for overlooking entrenched forms of domination, particularly along lines of class, gender, and race. These critiques revealed the concept's insufficient attention to structural inequalities, raising fundamental questions about who is granted access to public discourse and under what conditions. By revisiting the criticisms directed at Habermas' foundational text, we can better grasp the conceptual blind spots of his framework – especially its failure to fully account for the plural, conflictual, and often exclusionary realities of public life. Yet despite these limitations, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* remains indispensable, not only for its pioneering analysis but also for the rich debates it continues to provoke about democracy, power, and the contested nature of public space.

Habermas' aim was to elaborate an investigation of the historical trends of the public sphere as a bourgeois category from the seventeenth to the mid-twentieth century in England, France, and Germany. He exposes its emergence in the liberal context alongside the formation of a "public composed of critically debating private persons" (Habermas, 1990, p. 82), investigating its later transformations within the framework of the Welfare State. Habermas' purpose is not only that of historical description (although a large part of the book is based on historical reconstruction), but also to make a link between emancipatory bourgeois ideals and the idea of democracy as self-determination and the political self-government of free and equal citizens. For him, then, the public sphere should in some way represent a defense of the normative principles of inclusion and equality. Some important criticisms of Habermas' book emphasized its insufficient

historical and normative assumptions since he reduced his concept to the reality of bourgeois civil society over a limited period of time and with specific criteria for inclusion and participation. Because of this approach, many were excluded from the reconstruction of the "bourgeois" public sphere, as Habermas himself acknowledged later (Habermas, 1992). For example, this was not the history of the proletariat in the same period and also not a public sphere sensitive to gender or racial domination. On the contrary, Habermas failed to see that this same public sphere had subordinated certain social groups[2].

Nancy Fraser developed one of the most theoretically significant reconceptualization of the public sphere, particularly in relation to its structural exclusions and the alternative publics formed by marginalized social groups. She systematized the limits of the "classic", "liberal", or "official" public sphere (in the terms used by Fraser herself), mainly because the concept was incapable of embracing a more current diagnosis of new social movements and political struggles in multicultural societies. According to Fraser, the concept of the public sphere leaves out the alternative forms of public expression, the "counterpublics" (or, more precisely, the "*subaltern counterpublics*"), that dispute the dominant mode of the public sphere. Fraser argues that subaltern groups form "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1997a, p. 81). And members of such subordinated social groups are "women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians" (Fraser, 1997a, p. 81). Fraser systematically deconstructed the normative assumptions underlying the "classic" bourgeois public sphere model, revealing its structural inability to accommodate the complex realities of identity-based movements and emancipatory struggles in pluralistic democracies - a critique that ultimately informed her project of articulating a radical, "post-bourgeois" conception of public discourse.

Opinion and will formation in the public sphere, when viewed from the perspective of subaltern groups (influenced by the effects of subordination by and exclusion from existing public opinion and its institutions), presupposes a process of dispute between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses. Fraser relies on Gramscian concepts in order to emphasize the new type of domination in the public sphere. According to Fraser, the power and domination exercised by civil society groups no longer depend on a form of openly repressive and explicitly violent oppression. (In modern times, this only occurs at times of crisis, and during wars and dictatorships.) By being more "subtle" and internalizing the values

and opinions of the majority, the mode of domination based on cultural "hegemony" is usually effective in that it relies on the public consent of the members of civil society, creating a kind of consenting subordination. The modern liberal public sphere, in turn, is the political arena *par excellence* of the self-assertion of bourgeois civil society, that is, where such a society exercises its hegemonic domination. Thus, culturally dominant ideas and values, which are legitimized by public consent based on the opinion of the majority, produce the hegemonic form of political domination. The "official public sphere", says Fraser, is the "prime institutional site for the construction of the consent that defines the new, hegemonic mode of domination" (Fraser 1997a, p. 76).

However, even though in her diagnosis Fraser identifies the public sphere as one of the most important hegemonic modes of domination, she also seeks to develop a renewed concept of public sphere that is useful for a critical theory of democracy. This could also make explicit the emancipatory potential of the public sphere in its counter-hegemonic forms of expression and action among subaltern groups. Since subaltern groups normally live in more precarious social conditions and are not in a position to participate in political processes (either formal or informal), they form alternative publics for the thematization of and deliberation on their needs, objectives and strategies. Therefore, the concept of subaltern counterpublics must presuppose a conception of political democracy that is more inclusive of social matters, that is, of the reality of stratified and culturally plural societies. For this reason, according to Fraser, the anti-racist movement and the feminist movement are two important examples of subaltern counterpublics whose members have organized themselves politically around certain experiences of subordination and domination. They created alternative spaces of socialization where they could form their own opinions, pursue the public conditions for deliberation, and produce counterarguments for the thematization of their social realities.

At the core of this theoretical framework lies the premise that counterpublics emerge as oppositional formations in response to concrete hegemonic structures of domination. Fraser's analysis situates these subaltern collectives in direct tension with institutional apparatuses – such as the state, capitalist markets, and the heteronormative family – as well as with the cultural norms that sustain androcentric, racist, and heteropatriarchal logics. Crucially, she argues that the lived experience of subalternity – marked by systemic deprivation, exclusion, and exploitation – serves not merely as a condition of oppression but as the very ground from which counterpublics articulate their emancipatory struggles. This perspective suggests that the critical definition of counterpublics hinges on

their structural position: they are not merely *different* publics but are constituted through their antagonistic relationship to dominant power formations. In other words, it is precisely their subjugated status – and their capacity to reinterpret their marginalization through a lens of resistance – that transforms them into politically generative forces. Thus, Fraser's framework implies that counterpublics are not just alternative discursive spaces but are inherently *oppositional*, reshaping their exclusion into a basis for critical consciousness and collective mobilization.

This theoretical framework posits emancipation as intrinsically linked to the democratization of public sphere – a process that necessitates not merely formal inclusion, but the substantive capacity of marginalized groups to articulate counter-discourses, advance alternative epistemologies, and mobilize dissent. True democratic engagement, in this view, requires the structural conditions for subaltern voices to intervene effectively: to formulate claims, deploy arguments, stage appeals, and enact demonstrations that challenge dominant narratives. The vitality of the public sphere thus depends on the active presence of counterpublics, whose struggles disrupt the discursive hegemony of privileged social actors. In their absence, the perspectives of dominant groups – buttressed by institutional power, cultural capital, and material resources – would inevitably monopolize public discourse, reproducing existing hierarchies under the guise of neutral deliberation. Counterpublics, therefore, perform a dual democratic function: they *expose* the exclusionary logic embedded in mainstream public spheres, while simultaneously *prefiguring* more radical forms of participation. It follows that "the proliferation of subaltern counterpublics means a widening of discursive contestation, and that is a good thing in stratified societies" (Fraser, 1997, p. 85), because "arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public" (p. 81). Fraser works here with an important distinction between a singular public (relatively homogeneous and, therefore, culturally dominant) and a multiple public (open in principle to multicultural societies). A robust framework for egalitarian social organizations requires both the institutionalization of plural contestation and the proliferation of multiple public arenas. This structural multiplicity serves as a necessary precondition for dismantling entrenched hierarchies of class, gender, and race, while simultaneously creating space for continuous cultural negotiation among diverse social formations. The vision of a truly egalitarian society - one that transcends not only economic stratification but all forms of categorical domination - depends fundamentally on this dynamic interplay of competing publics

engaged in perpetual democratic struggle. Such an arrangement recognizes that equality cannot be achieved through mere formal inclusion within existing structures but rather demands the radical transformation of public space itself. The coexistence of multiple, often competing publics creates the conditions for the articulation of marginalized perspectives, the contestation of dominant cultural narratives, and the negotiation of new social arrangements. This constant dialectic between established and emergent publics serves as both the means and ends of egalitarian social transformation.

II

It seems clear that the concept of counterpublic developed by Nancy Fraser proved to be fruitful in understanding various types of social conflicts, especially conflicts formed by alternative grammars of the emancipatory image of minorities and non-hegemonic groups. We could even say that subaltern counterpublics are a sociological expression of the normative dimensions of recognition and redistribution that the author herself has investigated in the last few years. Therefore, the diagnosis of time produced by Fraser points to the fact that subaltern groups have emancipatory grammars that can be understood to some extent as "struggles for recognition" or "struggles for redistribution"[3]. However, Fraser seems to have slightly altered her understanding of the role of the concept of counterpublic due to three new factors that, in my view, are somehow connected. The first two factors relate to Fraser's new political diagnoses, more specifically to an ambiguity of the new social struggles of today. The third factor presents a reason that is, above all, theoretical: Fraser no longer seems to base her concepts on a Habermasian paradigm. Instead, she places at the center of her theory a constitutive separation between economy and society that she discovered in Karl Polanyi's approach (Fraser, 2011).

In the first case, particularly concerning gender struggles, Fraser has frequently highlighted the "unhappy marriage" that has solidified in recent decades – for instance, between feminism and neoliberalism (Fraser, 2008b; 2013). By challenging the centrality of recognition and the cultural politics of identity, she critiques Critical Theory and even certain social movements for neglecting redistributive issues and failing to adequately address neoliberalism's damaging effects. Fraser introduced the term "progressive neoliberalism" to analyze the contradictions within new social movements, particularly contemporary feminism. This framework critiques how economic justice and welfare concerns are sidelined in favor of identity

politics and personal freedoms. By prioritizing cultural recognition and individual autonomy, progressive neoliberalism often neglects broader struggles for economic equality (Fraser, 2013). Fraser's concept reveals the tensions between emancipatory ideals and their co-optation by neoliberal forces.[4] For my argument, the key point is that the ambiguities inherent in the grammar of recognition also generated a parallel ambiguity in the very concept of subaltern counterpublics. This ambiguity, in turn, could not be resolved immanently within counterpublics, as it pertained to their conceptual definition and political practice. Fraser undertakes a reassessment of the normative criteria of recognition, resulting in a more nuanced and skeptical view of the emancipatory potential of social struggles tied to identity politics and cultural injustice. Crucially, she not only questions the "progressive" deployment of the grammar of recognition by social movements but also draws attention to its appropriation by conservative groups, revealing how recognition frameworks can be co-opted to reinforce regressive agendas.

In the second case, particularly in the contemporary context following Brexit and Donald Trump's election, Fraser became even more forceful in her effort to diagnose the political moment (Fraser, 2017; Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018). While progressive social movements – since the 1960s – have made strides in advancing diversity, minority inclusion, the recognition of marginalized identities, and the empowerment of subaltern groups, these gains have failed to curb capitalism's destructive tendencies, which Fraser argues have grown *even more severe* under financialized neoliberalism. This critique is aimed squarely at the Left and carries immediate implications for the concept of counterpublics. Yet Fraser's analysis goes further: she highlights how neoliberalism's erosion of social protections does not only harm groups traditionally supported by progressive policies. Her shift in focus allows her to examine other sectors of society – often associated with conservative and reactionary views – who are also suffering from economic destabilization and the loss of social security. These groups, feeling abandoned and resentful, become fertile grounds for right-wing populism. As Fraser underscores, their political energy is increasingly channeled into reactionary and even authoritarian movements, which exploit their grievances while diverting blame away from neoliberalism itself.

The point here is not to suggest that marginalized groups – such as women and Black communities, who have long been (and remain) subaltern counterpublics – are no longer impacted by economic and political crises. Rather, it is to highlight how, in the face of these new challenges, additional groups have now taken on the role of "counterpublics". Among them are

many unemployed individuals, including a significant number of white men who have been displaced by neoliberal policies. Crucially, these men often perceive progressive redistributive programs – particularly those targeting racial minorities, women, or other historically disadvantaged groups – as exclusionary, even unjust, given that they themselves did not directly benefit from such policies. This sense of neglect fueled their demand for more radical political and institutional change. At the same time, while the economic and political crises spurred widespread protests and activism on the left, they also galvanized a highly organized "new right", which gained traction both in civil society and the political system by capitalizing on the grievances of those who felt left behind – or even penalized – by progressive reforms.

From the standpoint of a more assertive left-wing political strategy, Fraser argued even more forcefully that the left must move beyond culturalist and minority-focused frameworks – while still preserving the autonomy and diversity of social movements – and instead rally behind a "new coalition". This coalition would mark a decisive break from the primacy of "cultural recognition" as the dominant political grammar, which had long centered the struggles of social minorities. Rather than fixating on the particularities of individual marginalized groups, this new alliance would adopt a universalist commitment – one that actively incorporates the grievances and demands of those previously sidelined in progressive agendas, including working-class and economically precarious populations whose struggles were often eclipsed by identity-based claims. Only by broadening its scope in this way, Fraser contended, could the left forge "a new alliance of emancipation and social protection against financialization" (Fraser, 2017) – one capable of uniting disparate struggles under a shared, transformative vision.[5]

In this second moment, we observe that while the concept of counterpublics can indeed be applied to more liberal or conservative groups – even those mobilizing in response to economic crises or political misrepresentation – it is crucial to note that subalternity is not a necessary condition for their formation. Fraser herself remains ambiguous on the precise relationship between counterpublics and the subaltern status of their members, failing to fully clarify whether structural oppression is essential to the definition. However, as subsequent scholarship has demonstrated, counterpublics do not emerge solely from subalternity. Instead, factors such as perceived conflict, barriers to public expression, and experiences of cultural or social devaluation can also lead groups to articulate themselves as counterpublics – that is, as collectives fostering alternative perspectives in opposition to considered dominant worldviews.

This critical refinement owes much to Michael Warner (2005), whose work represents a decisive theoretical intervention by explicitly decoupling the concept of counterpublics from the condition of subalternity. Warner's formulation expands the framework of counterpublics beyond marginalized identities, offering a dynamic perspective on how oppositional collectives form through cultural confrontation. His approach reveals how counterpublics emerge not just through shared oppression, but through active dissent against dominant cultural norms and the creation of alternative public worlds. Warner examines how these groups develop distinct cultural logics that challenge hegemonic worldviews while simultaneously constructing unshared discursive universes. This perspective highlights that counterpublics don't merely resist dominant culture - they cultivate competing cultural imaginaries with their own terms of recognition and value. By focusing on cultural production and circulation, Warner shows how counterpublics sustain themselves through oppositional reading practices, alternative genres, and counter-hegemonic modes of agency. His analysis thus provides crucial tools for understanding how dissent organizes itself culturally, beyond the binary of inclusion/exclusion in the dominant public sphere. Building on these foundations, Freya Thimsen's work (2017), for example, systematically maps the variable conditions enabling counterpublic emergence.

Warner's framework insists that the constitution of counterpublics arises from a relationship of domination, but crucially, this dynamic is rooted in the self-perception of certain groups as subordinate within a dominant cultural-political order. While the objective condition of subalternity remains central to progressive struggles – serving as both a material reality and a mobilizing force – it is not the sole criterion for counterpublic formation. What matters, for Warner, is that these groups perceive themselves as marginalized in relation to a hegemonic discourse, whether or not they occupy a structurally oppressed position. This logic explains why even groups with significant social privilege – such as segments of Trump's base – can coalesce into a counterpublic. As Thimsen argues, these actors do not fit traditional definitions of subalternity, yet they view themselves as culturally and politically subordinate, reacting against what they perceive as a "left-wing hegemony" controlling mainstream institutions. Their antagonism stems not from material dispossession but from a sense of exclusion from dominant narratives, which fuels their oppositional identity. This phenomenon is further illustrated in Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016), where the "deep stories" of conservative communities reveal a self-conception as victims of systemic neglect – both by the state and the

cultural elite. Their grievances, though distinct from those of progressive counterpublics, follow a parallel structure: they articulate their identity against a dominant order they experience as hostile, producing counter-discourses and collective indignation. Warner's key intervention, then, is to decouple counterpublicity from objective subalternity, showing how it operates as a relational and perceptual struggle – one that can encompass both emancipatory movements and reactionary mobilizations, so long as they frame themselves as resisting an overbearing cultural hegemony.

These reflections reveal the limitations of Fraser's definition, which cannot fully account for the diverse manifestations of counterpublics in contemporary politics. Updating our analytical framework is thus essential for accurate diagnosis. As Warner pointedly asks: What truly makes a public "oppositional" in Fraser's formulation? He argues: "There would be no difference between counterpublics and any other publics. Fraser's description of what counterpublics do [...] sounds like the classically Habermasian description of rational-critical publics, with the word 'oppositional' inserted" (Warner, 2005, p. 118). Warner's critique exposes a fundamental gap in Fraser's approach. Counterpublics are not merely "alternative" spaces (featuring alternative discourses, media, or themes). Rather, they emerge through active conflict with dominant cultural norms – a tension rooted in their very mode of being. As Warner stresses: Counterpublics are subordinated (or "treated with hostility") because their way of existing and manifesting itself in society usually comes into direct conflict with dominant cultural forms, and this is due to the properly "poetic-expressive", often radical, way in which counterpublics place themselves in the public sphere (Warner, 2005, p. 120). This "poetic-expressive" dimension – the stylized, disruptive performance of difference – is what distinguishes counterpublics from mere dissenting voices. They do not just critique power; they embody an aesthetic and political rupture, forcing dominant publics to confront their exclusionary logic. Fraser's framework, by contrast, risks reducing counterpublics to oppositional debate groups, missing their radical transformative, world-making potential.

As mentioned earlier, Fraser is changing his diagnosis, although she has not made explicit a new formulation of counterpublicity. One could say that perhaps "subalternity" is used to understand more "objective" conditions of domination, while subordination has to do above all with the feeling and the perception of groups that consider themselves to be excluded from the dominant public sphere. Sometimes, it probably would be more appropriate to understand the distinction between subalternity and subordination in recent debates having considered the political differences

between left and right-wing groups, differences that are central to the current diagnosis of the public sphere in many countries. But conservative groups (and right-wing populist parties) entered the political arena because this time they consider themselves to be the new *underrepresented*. So, in order to produce an adequate diagnosis of this complex political situation, as Fraser defends, "we need to understand what those who voted for them [conservative parties] were so upset about – what they were determined to put an end to" (Fraser, 2018, p. 204). Then, right-wing populist movements today are "rejecting the whole package"; that is, they are forming a conte public which targets the economic (financialization) and cultural hegemony (the recognition of progressive minorities) that, according to their own narratives, have "diminished their chances – and those of their children – to live good lives" (2018, p. 205).

The conservative contestation has created a dynamic of conflicts in the public sphere that is increasingly marked by cultural and social reactions to progressive positions, something like a war against the hegemonic currents of emancipatory movements (feminism, multiculturalism, antiracism, LGBTQ rights, etc.), and a defense of "old-fashioned" family values and life worlds. In other words, these dynamics can be understood as a conservative insurgency against progressive policies based on the logic of a reaction from groups not contemplated by cultural and identity politics. This leads to the perception by certain conservative groups of an economic and political crisis in which only some "other" groups (the so-called "subaltern groups") are considered privileged in some way (either by redistributive policies or by a kind of "progressive" cultural hegemony).

Although the analyses are varied with regards to the reaction against the historical gains achieved mainly since the 1960s, the attempt to replace the progressive paradigm with conservative populist demands has been understood by many authors to be a result of a *backlash*[6]. Sometimes called "cultural backlash" or even "white backlash", and always explicitly linked to phenomena such as Brexit, Trump and forms of "authoritarian populism", this concept refers to a specific process of reaction to the achievements of certain groups and themes of the public sphere. The term *backlash* carries two significant connotations. First, it highlights genuine social and economic struggles faced by a substantial portion of the population, underscoring the need for more inclusive redistributive policies. Second, it fuels the rise of right-wing counterpublics—conservative factions that push back against what they perceive as an overly pluralistic and socially liberal public sphere. These counterpublics, which often frame themselves as marginalized within contemporary political discourse, rally around traditionalist causes. These include opposition to "excessive" affirmative action for women and Afro-

descendants, skepticism toward claims of systemic oppression by subaltern groups, and resistance to shifts in public morality that challenge Christian norms. Examples include the fierce backlash against the U.S. Supreme Court's legalization of same-sex marriage or xenophobic anti-immigration rhetoric that exploits fears of terrorism. In both economic and sociocultural spheres—whether through neoliberal austerity or reactionary moral campaigns—these disputes ultimately challenge the principles of recognition and identity politics, positioning themselves against progressive shifts in societal values.

An important point should be mentioned here. The reduction of the diagnosis to a "culture war" leads to the eclipsing of the more fundamental issues that are producing the current democratic crisis in light of the effects of a crisis of capitalism itself, which is where Fraser is rightly urging us to look. The political conflicts cannot be divorced from their economic foundations, as contemporary crises emerge precisely from the interconnection between cultural and material struggles. The rise of conservative movements worldwide demonstrates how economic dislocation – precarity, inequality, and the erosion of social protections – fuses with cultural backlash against progressive shifts in identity, values, and representation. Neoliberal globalization not only destabilized livelihoods but also accelerated cultural transformations, generating a reactionary politics that conflates economic despair with the defense of tradition. This dynamic reveals that recognition (symbolic belonging) and redistribution (material justice) are inseparable, as Fraser says. Treating them as distinct leads to a flawed understanding of today's political ruptures. Right-wing populism exploits this fusion, channeling anti-elite resentment against both economic marginalization and perceived cultural threats, from immigration to gender politics. The result is a paradoxical opposition that rejects neoliberal economics while embracing exclusionary cultural restoration, obscuring the systemic roots of crisis. To confront this effectively, we must analyze how economic and cultural grievances reinforce each other, rather than reducing reactionary mobilization to either sphere alone. The crisis demands an integrated critique – one that sees culture and economy as entwined battlegrounds in the same structural conflict.

As previously discussed, the first two factors – the first, which refers to progressive neoliberalism, and the second, to the emergence of right-wing and extreme right-wing groups – reflect a shift in Fraser's analysis of social movements during times of economic and political crisis. The third factor stems from her acceptance of Karl Polanyi's theoretical premise – the fundamental divide between state and economy, or more precisely, between marketization and social protection (Fraser, 2011). Fraser

interprets this division as an unmediated *boundary struggle*, forcing a binary choice: either one supports market-driven economics or advocates for societal welfare and protection. However, when we connect this concept of boundary struggle (which, for Fraser, includes a third dimension, *emancipation*) with contemporary public sphere conflicts, we observe two distinct alliances taking shape. First, in the neoliberal era, an alliance emerged between marketization and emancipatory movements, positioned *against* social protection – a dynamic Fraser critically labels "progressive neoliberalism." Second, in reaction to this progressive alliance, a new conservative bloc has formed, uniting social protection and emancipation *against* neoliberal marketization. This latter alliance – which helps explain the rise of conservative counter-hegemonic movements – reveals that much of today's anti-capitalist ressentiment and contestation cannot be simplistically categorized as leftist. On the contrary, it reflects a broader, more complex resistance that transcends traditional political divisions.

Fraser argues that right-wing populism today stands as one of the most significant counter-movements in critical discourse, alongside radical progressive struggles, as both represent *anti-neoliberal forces* that reject "the neoliberal project and its hegemony" (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018, p. 195). While these movements often take reactionary forms, their conservative tendencies should not obscure the deeper *grammars of contestation* they express – grammars that are crucial for critical theory to engage with, as they emerge from real experiences of social suffering, indignation, and crisis. Central to this dynamic is the role of *resentment* – a powerful affective force that fuels much of today's anti-neoliberal but reactionary mobilization. Resentment here is not merely an irrational backlash; rather, it is a structural response to perceived injustices, betrayals, and dislocations wrought by decades of neoliberal policies. As Fraser acknowledges, "right-wing populists do have genuine grievances, which deserve to be validated. And reactionary populist movements are responding to a real underlying crisis, which also requires acknowledgment" (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018, p. 199). This resentment arises from a sense of moral injury – the feeling that traditional social protections, cultural norms, and economic stability have been eroded by a cosmopolitan elite that privileges market logic over communal bonds.

While progressive movements critique neoliberalism from the standpoint of inequality and exclusion, reactionary movements channel similar critiques through a lens of *cultural displacement* – resenting not just economic precarity but also the perceived dismantling of national identity, religious values, and social hierarchies. The danger, however, lies in how

this resentment is weaponized. Rather than targeting the structural causes of crisis – financialized capitalism, corporate power, and austerity, for example – it is often redirected toward scapegoats: immigrants, racial minorities, feminists, and LGBTQ+ communities. This deflection sustains the very neoliberal order these movements claim to oppose, as it fractures solidarity and obscures the shared material roots of discontent. Thus, for critical theory, the challenge is twofold: to acknowledge the legitimate suffering and disillusionment that fuel reactionary movements, while interrogating how resentment is politically mobilized in ways that reinforce domination rather than emancipation. Only by confronting this tension can we grasp the full complexity of contemporary anti-neoliberal struggles – both their emancipatory potential and their regressive pitfalls.

Conservative protests are often analyzed through the lens of *counter-hegemony*, revealing how marginalized groups – even reactionary ones – mobilize against dominant narratives. While some argue that applying such critical frameworks to right-wing and far-right movements strips these concepts of their emancipatory and normative force, we contend the opposite: these movements expose contradictions within neoliberalism itself, even as they reject progressive alternatives. In Fraser's view, the paradox lies in how these reactionary counterpublics oppose neoliberal hegemony *without embracing emancipatory politics*. They channel genuine discontent – economic precarity, cultural dislocation, institutional distrust – but redirect it toward exclusionary agendas: xenophobia, authoritarianism, and the erosion of democratic norms. This raises a crucial question: How can resistance to neoliberalism be articulated outside the traditional emancipatory framework, and at what cost? These movements thrive on contradictions. They criticize elite cosmopolitanism while often upholding capitalist hierarchies; they weaponize populist anger against "woke capital" while aligning with corporate power; they demand social protection while dismantling welfare systems in the name of tradition. Their opposition to neoliberal globalization coexists with a nostalgia for an idealized past – one that never truly existed. Yet, according to Fraser, their rise forces us to confront uncomfortable truths. If progressive forces fail to address the material and existential anxieties fueling reactionary backlash, does that vacuum inevitably empower anti-democratic alternatives? And can the critique of neoliberalism retain its transformative potential when detached from the project of emancipation, or does it risk becoming another tool of domination?

III

Nancy Fraser is an author who consistently challenges us to grapple with the pressing conflicts of our time, offering incisive analyses that span from her feminist critique of the welfare state to examinations of progressive neoliberalism, the contradictions of the "post-socialist condition", and the structural crises of contemporary capitalism (Melo, 2023). This breadth and depth solidify her position as one of the most vital voices in critical theory today. Yet, true to her own intellectual ethos, Fraser's work invites us to critically engage with concepts in a way that bridges their "contexts of origin" and "contexts of application"– that is, by recognizing both the historical roots of theoretical frameworks and the specificities of their deployment. This approach ensures that critical theory remains dynamic, empirically grounded, and responsive to the particularities of different struggles, resisting one-size-fits-all solutions while maintaining its transformative potential (Melo, 2017).

The concept of the counterpublics stands out as one of the relatively rare cases in which an original contribution from critical theory has been appropriated and expanded by more traditional theoretical frameworks, giving rise to a distinct and thriving field of study over the past two decades. Today, Counterpublic Studies is a vibrant interdisciplinary domain, engaging scholars from Communication Studies, Literary Theory, Philosophy, Anthropology, Political Science, Sociology, and beyond. While its influence has been strongly felt in the Global North, a growing body of theoretical and empirical research has also emerged particularly in Brazil, where much of the re-reading and reworking of these debates engages not only with Fraser's foundational contributions but also extends beyond them (Melo, 2021; Medeiros; Melo; Fanti, 2023). Notably, the rise of the far right has prompted Brazilian scholars to rethink Fraser's framework, particularly in relation to the condition of subalternity, pushing the concept of counterpublics into new and urgent political contexts.

The role of subaltern counterpublics and their relationship to hegemonic culture has been a key focus in research on Brazil's public sphere. Despite the dominance of a hegemonic public sphere, alternative spaces of sociability have historically given rise to subaltern public spheres. These have taken shape through abolitionist and anti-racist struggles, popular movements among marginalized groups, peasant leagues, and the mobilization of new social movements – such as those led by women, Black communities, environmentalists, and advocates for agrarian and urban reform. These subaltern publics have consistently *"resisted, in different ways, hegemonic discourses"* (Perlatto, 2015, p. 139). Many studies have

emphasized the alternative, innovative, and transformative character of these formations, often finding in Fraser's work a key theoretical benchmark for understanding the dynamics of subaltern publics in Brazil.[7]

The concept of counterpublics has been applied broadly and flexibly, allowing for its reconstruction across various conflicts in Brazil's public sphere. It has been used to analyze feminist collectives (Medeiros, 2017), the student movements that occupied hundreds of schools between 2015 and 2016 (Medeiros; Melo; Januário, 2019), and the rise of a militant conservative "new right" (ROCHA, 2018, 2021), and "far right" (Rocha; Solano; Medeiros, 2021). Moreover, the clashes between counterpublics have become increasingly visible – both on the streets and, especially, online – through disputes on social media, digital backlash, and opposing political discourses (as seen in debates over homophobia, sexual harassment, feminist activism, military intervention, school occupations, hate speech, and fake news) (Neris; Valente, 2018). While much of this research builds on Fraser's framework, it also opens space for reconsidering Warner's theorization of non-subaltern counterpublics, highlighting how even dominant or reactionary groups mobilize counterpublic strategies to reshape public discourse.

Political and social theories must grapple with the fact that the evolving composition of the public sphere has fueled increasingly intense – and at times violent – clashes between progressive and conservative forces, permeating both institutional politics and the fabric of everyday social relations. A critical theory of democracy must therefore offer a nuanced and contextually grounded diagnosis of the conflicts shaping contemporary political culture. The debate initiated by Fraser around a "post-bourgeois" conception of the public sphere has proven particularly fruitful in this regard, opening up rich analytical possibilities. By challenging the exclusionary norms of traditional bourgeois publicity, her framework has allowed for a more expansive use of counterpublicity – not only as a tool for emancipatory struggles but also as a lens to diagnose the fractures, antagonisms, and transformative potentials within our society. This approach reveals how marginalized groups forge oppositional publics while also exposing how reactionary movements appropriate similar strategies, demanding a critical reassessment of democratic promises inscribed in actually existing public spheres.

My intention in this article was only to draw attention to how critical and normative concepts must be produced and renewed in accordance with the social and political contexts from which they derive their most relevant meaning for a critical theory of democracy. "Subaltern counterpublics" are decisive in an understanding of the conflicts between dominant publics and

excluded social groups (workers, racialized groups, women, etc.), and for the formation of a different associational life (sites and fora for members of subaltern groups, where they can discuss, thematize and formulate their own social perspectives in an autonomous way). But the actions of counterpublics, along with important changes in the political and social context, have also created the conditions for the emergence of new conservative contestations. Thus, we must understand the nature of the conflicts in the public sphere according to their ideas, arguments, campaigns, protests, votes, and how they are influencing a wider public debate – after all, the right-wing populist parties have risen to power in many countries, bringing with them legal and institutional change. As far as I can see – and maybe this is the most important thing for social and political theories to consider – the composition of the public sphere is provoking increasingly intense public disputes between progressive and conservative groups. Fraser's work has long recognized the public sphere as the central arena where political conflicts are articulated, contested, and ultimately made legible. For her, it is not merely one site among others but an epistemologically privileged space – a lens through which the fractures, contradictions, and crises of a society become intelligible. By analyzing how subaltern counterpublics challenge hegemony or how reactionary movements exploit democratic openings, Fraser demonstrates that the public sphere crystallizes the very tensions that define a political moment. This approach reveals why critical theory must engage deeply with the dynamics of the public sphere: moments of political crisis are rendered visible in the struggles over who speaks, who is heard, and on what terms. To follow Fraser's analysis of the political crisis – and to actually be able to think beyond her – is thus to grasp critical theory's core task: to produce *situated diagnoses* that uncover the roots of conflict in the interplay of power, discourse, interest, and inequality. Her framework insists that without such an understanding of the public sphere, no diagnosis of the present can be truly comprehensive – or transformative.

Notes

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[2] It is not possible to discuss all the aspects of these criticisms here. To a large extent, they concern specific exclusions, such as "gender" (Landes, 1988, Meehan, 1995), "race" (Doreski, 1999, Hill Collins, 2000) and "class" (Kluge, Negt, 1993). The most comprehensive critical reception of Habermas's book on the public sphere is found in Calhoun, 1992.

[3] With this, I locate a first set of Fraser texts, where the discussions in which she drew the conceptual distinction between redistribution and recognition (1997b) should be considered along with the context of problems connected with her initial reflections on the public sphere (1997a). As is well known, Fraser has also developed a different concept of the public sphere in dealing with transnational problems (2008a), albeit with distinct theoretical approaches from those presented with the counterpublics, which I consider to be more fruitful. For a critique of the conception of a transnational public sphere in Fraser see Melo, 2015.

[4] Fraser criticizes "third wave" feminism for aligning with neoliberal capitalism by prioritizing individual empowerment, identity politics, and cultural recognition over collective economic justice and structural redistribution. She argues that this shift – exemplified by lean-in corporate feminism and meritocratic ideals – reinforces market-driven values rather than challenging systemic inequalities. By focusing on breaking glass ceilings for elite women while ignoring broader class and labor struggles, third-wave feminism, in her view, inadvertently legitimizes the very systems that perpetuate exploitation and economic disparity. For Fraser, true emancipation requires linking struggles for recognition with those for redistribution, rather than subordinating economic justice to cultural demands. On these topics, see Fraser, 2013, 2017. Also, Melo, 2023.

[5] The culmination of this new perspective appears in the collective manifesto entitled "Feminism for 99 Percent". In this text, Fraser makes clear her intention to build a broad coalition to confront the political and economic crisis. And she sees in the new feminism (now a "radical" feminism, not aligned with neoliberalism, a feminism that is the fruit of the economic crisis that began in 2008) a care to align redistribution and recognition. The feminist struggle must not be a struggle only

for women (or certain groups of women), but a struggle for the overwhelming majority: for black people, for indigenous people, an anti-capitalist struggle, in favor of environmental issues, etc., including "white bourgeois men" who are also affected by neoliberalism. See Arruzza; Batthacharya; Fraser, 2019.

[6] In many places the "right-wing" populist wave has produced backlash conflicts. Important studies are being done mainly in the USA. Cf. Faludi, 2006; Abrajano; Hajnal, 2015; Norris; Inglehardt, 2019.

[7] For a more complete presentation of the research that has been carried out in Brazil on the concept of counterpublics see Melo, 2021.

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Recebido/*Received*: 13/05/2025
Aprovado/*Approved*: 24/07/2025
Publicado/*Published*: 08/08/2025