Maria Grever

Dear Professor Fraser, Ladies and gentlemen,

For historians, political scientists and gender specialists, Professor Fraser’s work has been extremely important. Take, for example, her book *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (1989), a series of essays which constituted a critical encounter with leading approaches to social and political theory. This volume has inspired many scholars, including our present Minister of Education, Culture, and Science, Dr. Jet Bussemaker, who published her PhD thesis on gender, individualism and the Dutch welfare state in 1993.

Nancy Fraser is one of the leading gender critics of Jürgen Habermas’ theory of the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. - Coincidentally, two weeks ago Habermas gave a lecture to a packed hall at our university. - In his analysis of late eighteenth century Western European society, Habermas distinguished between the State, the Market and the Public Sphere. It is in this third arena that people can participate in rational communication about matters of common interest and politics. This public sphere of newspapers, clubs and private associations is distinct from the State (whose monopoly on coercion limits free interaction between citizens) and from the Market (where the distribution of wealth and property determines human relations). The public sphere or *civil society* was the space where people discussed issues of general interest with no stake in the outcome of the discussion. Since the age of Enlightenment, this had been the arena in which new forms of citizenship were molded.

Critics have pointed out that Habermas failed to recognize the masculine nature of the public sphere, that he never took into account that the boundary between public
and private spheres coincided with the dividing line between masculine and feminine domains. The problem with defining the public sphere as masculine, however, is that women who did take part in public debate can only be seen as exceptions, operating “beyond their sex”.

Fraser’s original contribution is to reveal that Habermas was wrong to assume that the nineteenth century bourgeois public sphere was the only public domain. She argues that the public sphere never was a monolithic entity, but consisted of a variety of publics and “counter-publics”. In her dynamic view the various public domains took shape simultaneously with, and often in opposition to, the dominant public sphere. Counter-publics differ from the classic public sphere: they have different criteria for participation and different standards for the style and content of communication.

The search for pluriformity in the public sphere corresponds to recent developments in citizenship studies. The idea that there was only one form of citizenship, a male-defined concept that excluded women, is giving way to a focus that traces different forms of citizenship that have developed through history. The ancient republican ideal, in which all citizens equally and directly participated in their community government, was revived in Rousseau’s ideal of direct participatory democracy in which the people constituted the nation. The rise of Liberalism in Europe and the United States resulted in a concept of citizenship that gave citizens a number of state-guaranteed rights and freedoms. Citizens were not obliged to govern the state directly, but were entitled to representation in the government. In this ideal of representative democracy, the rights of all go hand-in-hand with state responsibility for the welfare of all. The various concepts of citizenship were linked to several concurrent and interlaced forms of public discourse in the Western world.

By pluralizing the Habermassian approach of the public sphere and by influencing the work of a well-known male philosopher - which is an achievement in itself - Nancy Fraser has not only changed critical theory, but she has also made the historical position of women visible. In this way she has provided tools for next generations of
women to be acknowledged as agents in an increasingly mediatising society which generates new opportunities for and threats to the public sphere.

Jos de Mul

Nancy Fraser’s dynamic and historicizing approach of the public sphere is just one of her valuable contributions to critical theory and political philosophy. Professor’s Fraser’s work covers a broad domain and has played and still plays a leading role in many national and international debates on important issues such as the transnationalization of the neoliberal economy, social inequalities and global justice. Books like Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the “Postsocialist” Condition (1997), The Radical Imagination: Between Redistribution and Recognition (2003), and Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis (2013) have received international recognition and critical acclaim because of their originality and often provocative content. Her books have been translated in many languages. Her international reputation is also reflected in the frequent invitations for prestigious lecture series, such as the Tanner lectures at Stanford University and the Storrs Lectures at the Yale Law School, as well as in international appointments, such as her Einstein fellowship at the John F. Kennedy Institute of the Free University of Berlin, a chair in global justice at the Collège d’Études Mondiales in Paris, and a visiting professorship of gender studies at Cambridge University next winter.

If we glance over her impressive oeuvre, we notice that is has a Janus face. On the one hand, as a critical theorist in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, Nancy Fraser is a sharp and influential critic of competing paradigms in political philosophy – as we witness, for example, in her critical analyses of Richard Rorty, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. Fraser’s strategy in the eighties and nineties was to rethink their contributions to political theory by analyzing their work against the background of the growing global domination of neo-liberal political economy. In the case of Foucault,
for example, Fraser was one of the first to criticize Foucault’s refusal to justify his normative standards. Many others, including distinguished philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Michael Walzer, have followed Fraser in her critique of Foucault. Moreover, her critical attitude does not spare the tradition of critical theory she herself represents. Maria Grever already mentioned Fraser’s critique of the androcentric character of Habermas’ theory of the Public Sphere. More recently, Fraser was one of the first theorists to analyze the way transnationalization undermines the normative legitimacy and political efficacy of the public sphere. A couple of months ago Polity Press published Transnationalizing the Public Sphere, in which renowned scholars from different disciplines pay tribute to Fraser’s timely diagnosis of the present crisis of democracy, which was first published in 2007, just before the outbreak of the financial and euro crises. At this moment, facing bloody wars in Syria, Iraq, and Ukraine, Fraser’s diagnosis only has gained urgency.

However, and this brings me to the other, more constructive dimension of Fraser’s work, criticizing has never been a goal in itself, as her critique has always been instrumental to a more positive goal: the development of a theory of justice, which could function as a theoretical and practical weapon against the many manifestations of injustice in our present world. According to Fraser, justice is a complex concept which must be understood from the standpoint of three separate yet interrelated dimensions: the distribution of resources, the recognition of the varying contributions of different groups, as well as their cultural and linguistic representation.

In her book Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis (2013), Fraser uses this framework, not only to analyze – updating Karl Polanyi’s classic 1944 book The Great Transformation – the ecological, social, and financial crises caused by neoliberal capitalism, but also to plea for a more balanced and sustainable relationship between market, state and emancipatory movements. Fraser shows that she’s not only critical, but has a talent for self-criticism as well. According to Fraser, the feminist movement, that started out as a critique of capitalist exploitation, has ended up contributing key ideas to its latest neoliberal phase, and
thus has become the handmaiden of neo-liberalism. In the case of academia, for which societal relevance increasingly is becoming— in an Orwellian exercise of Newspeak – identical to contributing to economic growth, a similar argument could be made.

Fraser does not provide an easy roadmap to paradise, but rather offers a normative compass to guide our march towards a more sustainable ecological and socio-economic future. This alone already fully justifies awarding Professor Fraser an honorary doctorate.

Grever:  
“By virtue of the powers invested in us by statute and in accordance with the decision of the Doctorate Board, we hereby confer upon you, Nancy Fraser, the title of Doctor honoris causa, together with all the rights, which statute and custom attach to this degree.

De Mul:  As token and proof thereof, we present you with the corresponding charter, duly signed and sealed, and clothe you with the cappa.”