

## Book review

### **Nancy Fraser and participatory parity: Reframing social justice in South African higher education**

**edited by Vivienne Bozalek, Dorothee Hölscher, and Michalinos Zembylas**

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#### **Abstract**

In this review of *Nancy Fraser and participatory parity: Reframing social justice in South African higher education*, edited by Vivienne Bozalek, Dorothee Hölscher, and Michalinos Zembylas, book reviewer Sergio Celis discusses why this book is an invitation to reimagine our participation in the higher education field, as scholars, teachers, and citizens.

In the preface to the book *Nancy Fraser and participatory parity: Reframing social justice in South African higher education*, Nancy Fraser states that “struggles over higher education must encompass, among other things, struggles over its interpretation” (p. xvii). This volume is a timely entry to Fraser’s constellation of concepts and ideas that help us think deeply about a different higher education, as the editors of this book likewise remind us throughout the text. Despite Fraser being one of the most distinguished contemporary thinkers, her conceptualization of justice does not have widespread use in higher education studies. This book represents an opportunity to make explicit connections between Fraser’s theories and the struggles for justice in colleges and universities worldwide.

The setting for this effort is the South African higher education system, an illustrative case of segregation and other injustices, linked to a legacy of colonialism, racism, classism, poverty, environmental exploitation, among other struggles. This case reminds us that higher education injustices are present in similar forms across countries and regions. The South African case is also intertwined with global trends and forces that push us to detach our thinking from national and traditional borders – a way of thinking that is at the core of Nancy Fraser’s ideas of justice. Consistently, all the chapters in this book are written to be accessible to readers with limited or no knowledge of the South African case. Any reader interested in access and equity issues would easily connect with a familiar landscape and feel inspired, so as to challenge our current interpretations about *what* is just, and for *whom* is it just, in our higher education systems.

The book is centered around Fraser’s idea of *participatory parity*—the “possibility of participating on a par with others in social interactions” (Fraser, 2009: 18). When this participatory parity is denied, struggles for justice emerge. Fraser’s three-dimensional—economic, cultural, and political—theory of justice explains three obstacles to participation: maldistribution, misrepresentation, and misframing. Each chapter emphasizes different obstacles and goes forward, suggesting practices for redressing them. In Fraser’s framework, these practices include *affirmative practices*, those that ameliorate the consequences of injustices, and *transformative practices*, those that address the sources of injustice. In addition to these core concepts, the contributors to the book introduce connections and complement other of Fraser’s lesser-known ideas and other thinker’s conceptual work.

The book includes a preface written by Nancy Fraser and is organized into three parts. Part I addresses the struggle about how we interpret higher education. Hölscher and Bozalek’s Chapter 1 brilliantly serves as an introduction to Nancy Fraser’s lifetime of work and how this is relevant to higher education. It is written with clarity, is succinct, and works well for both those familiar with Fraser’s work and those who are not. Gray’s Chapter 2 calls us to find time for pleasure in the classroom as an act of resistance. This thought-provoking chapter offers conceptual fragments that could lead to possible acts of rebellion and connects Fraser with other philosophers such as Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari. Interestingly, as a critical resource in higher education, the concept of time appears across chapters (see Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 11). Carstens’ Chapter 3 discusses environmental ideas such as the Anthropocene, or Fraser’s Capitalocene, which urges us to “remember the hybrid indigenous cosmologies we appear to have forgotten” (p. 42) and to reconnect with and love the non-human beings around us. Carstens sees universities as places that could offer significant social and ecological care. Bozalek and Boughey’s Chapter 4 is the first chapter diving into the South African higher education system. The authors emphasize Fraser’s ‘misframing’ as a first-order injustice in the South

African higher education system. This chapter is a crucial contribution to the book, moving beyond the better-known injustices related to distribution and recognition. Here, a new framing attempts to emerge, which avoids universalistic perspectives of higher education systems and sees internal disparities at the core of injustices. The authors call to reassign blame, responsibilities, and opportunities in ways that a participatory parity may take shape in higher education classrooms and beyond.

Consistent with Fraser's principles, Part II brings a broad spectrum of students' voices to the fore. Shefer's Chapter 5 contrasts student experiences with the dimensions of maldistribution and misrecognition. The author acknowledges the complexities and the multiple interpretations of how students experience campus structures and interactions with peers. Through these students' experiences, we gain some access, although very limited, to some forms of empowerment and triggers of participatory parity. Carolissen's Chapter 6 uses Fraser's dimensions to analyze students' struggles in a community psychology program. Of note is that psychology holds a highly regarded and selective position among the professions in South Africa. Carolissen points out how even in community psychology, whose practice should involve some critical perspective, students see their struggles as personal rather than linked to social and cultural structures. Gredley's Chapter 7 goes in-depth into the students' voices to establish the ways in which material needs undermine any attempt at participatory parity – such as the stress of financing higher education, the perils of commuting, and poor housing accommodation. The living conditions of the students are a strong statement against any indulgent discourse of justice and participation in higher education. We also observe how ameliorative redistributive measures make a difference or create 'life-changing' experiences. There are brief examples of transformative practices that could potentially be supported at the national, institutional, and community levels. Khan's Chapter 8 also focuses on the economic dimension of justice, particularly on those students who "enjoy" university residency. Time as an essential resource for participatory parity appears again, as well as the undertraining of security guards, who may act corruptly or poorly manage serious situations, such as sexual assaults (see Chapter 7 for a case in which a library guard acts as an empowerment figure). Garraway and Langes's Chapter 9 investigates participatory parity in the extended curriculum — pedagogical activities designed to support students with poor academic backgrounds. This chapter shows how classroom practices, such as active learning, may enable an 'epistemic entrance' to the discipline. In some cases, these practices act as a source of misrepresentation, where students perceive they do not belong to the mainstream university.

Unfortunately, the book does not bring other actors' voices, such as instructors or other university workers, for example librarians, security guards, food, and cleaning workers. They are however mentioned continuously in students' quotes. Understanding the dynamics of university workers' participatory parity and other actors is necessary to understand the current injustices and imagine a different teaching and learning environment. In Part III, the book returns to reflective pieces and finds new ideas to move forward in the struggle over higher education. Hölscher *et al's* Chapter 10 and its concluding thoughts fill an important void in the previous chapters: discussing Fraser's theories with perspectives on decolonization and the geopolitical global North and South divide. These perspectives are important and are substantially addressed by scholars of higher education. The authors, acknowledging that Fraser speaks from the hegemonic United States of America, call for alliances and 'cross-pollination' of ideas that emerge as resistance in any place on the globe. Indeed, this non-

dualistic approach is much needed, and it represents a productive call for the field. Blackmore's Chapter 11, the book's afterword, suggests novel links with Fraser's theory and higher education conceptual frameworks, such as academic capitalism and center-periphery relations. This final chapter also works as a lucid summary of the book.

Further work and evidence are needed about the experiences of other actors of higher education, such as researchers, instructors, and university staff, and the ways in which participatory parity takes form in the interactions among them. Another pending undertaking is a critical discussion on the empirical methods used for answering our pressing research questions around issues of social justice. The chapters in Part II used qualitative methods based on interviews and students' writing and other artifacts, and analytical tools such as thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An exciting further task would be to evaluate these methods using Fraser's concepts. The book also initiates a dialogue between Fraser's theoretical work and other established critical frameworks in the field of higher education, such as decolonizing universities and academic capitalism. This dialogue should continue to engage with our educational systems' permanent reinterpretation at local and global scales. In sum, this book is an invitation to reimagine our participation in the higher education field, as scholars, teachers, and citizens.

**Funding sources:**

None.

**Acknowledgments:**

None.

**References**

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