Parity of Participation and the Politics of Status

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ABSTRACT: Over the past decade, Nancy Fraser has developed a sophisticated theory of social justice. At its heart lies the principle of parity of participation, according to which all adult members of society must be in a position to interact with one another as peers. This paper examines some obstacles to the implementation of that principle. Concentrating on the contemporary status order, it asks two specific questions. Is it possible to produce a precise account of how the status order might need to be ordered for parity of participation to be realized? And is it possible to derive a detailed and coherent political strategy capable of achieving such parity within the status order? The argument of this paper is that, while Fraser has recognised the difficulties that the complexity of the contemporary status order poses for achieving parity of participation, she has nevertheless underestimated those difficulties. If parity of participation requires status equality, important and difficult work remains to be done in delineating the nature, and demands, of equality in the contemporary status order.

Over the past decade, Nancy Fraser has developed a highly sophisticated theory of social justice. At its heart lies the principle of parity of participation, according to which social arrangements must 'permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers'.[1] This is an explicitly egalitarian ideal. As she puts it, 'The basic idea is that equal autonomy, properly understood, entails the real freedom to participate on a par with others in social life…Thus, participatory parity simply *is* the meaning of equal respect for the equal autonomy of human beings qua social actors'.[2] But Fraser identifies three types of obstacles, corresponding to three dimensions of the social order, which may prevent such parity from being achieved. People may be denied the social status, economic resources or political voice that they need in order to be able to participate on a par with others. It follows that a just society must be one in which the status order, economic structure and political constitution of society are so ordered that these three types of obstacles are overcome.

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Focusing on the principle of participatory parity (hereafter PPP) which lies at the heart of this account, the aim of this paper is to see whether it is possible to determine how this principle should be applied and what measures it may entail in practice. For our current purposes, we limit our attentions to the contemporary status order, and ask two specific questions. First: is it possible to infer from this principle a precise account of how the status order might need to be ordered for parity of participation to be realized? Second: is it possible to infer from the principle a detailed and coherent political strategy capable of achieving such parity within the status order? To answer these questions would, of course, be demanding for any theory of justice. But this is precisely the challenge Fraser suggests a genuinely critical theory should rise to: it should combine and 'connect the usually discrete levels of moral philosophy, social theory, and political analysis in a critical theory of capitalist society'.[3] Meeting this challenge successfully, she suggests, is what makes her own account distinctive and valuable.

In the first two thirds of the paper, we focus on the first of our two questions and ask if the necessary conditions of status equality can be deduced from the PPP. Our argument will be that, in light of what we shall call the *horizontal complexity* and *vertical complexity* of the status order, it is extremely difficult – and may be impossible – to ascertain what participatory parity will require in particular circumstances. At first glance, this might not appear to be a problem for Fraser. After all, in her recent writings she emphasizes the need to make pragmatic decisions about which measure will best promote participatory parity in particular circumstances. She suggests, furthermore, that the final choice should made by citizens in a process of democratic debate. However, this way of responding to our argument must still assume that it is possible at least to identify a *range* of options compatible with the PPP, amongst which citizens may choose. We shall argue, however, that it is often difficult if not impossible even to identify such a range. In the final third of the paper, we turn to the second of our questions. We ask if it is possible to derive from an account of the PPP an effective political strategy to attain it. Here we shall argue that acknowledgement of the complexity of the status order undermines central aspects of Fraser's political strategy.

Participatory Parity and the Status Order

The PPP, as Fraser defines it, requires social arrangements permitting all citizens to interact together as peers, in order that each should be 'a full member of society'.[4] One of the key preconditions for such participation to take place is that systematic inequalities between actors are not present. Indeed, one of Fraser's earliest uses of the term 'participatory parity' appeared in her critique of Jürgen Habermas' conception of the public sphere, in which she took him to task precisely for supposing that individuals could interact as political peers in the

presence of such inequalities. As she argued in that paper, 'it is a necessary condition for participatory parity that systematic social inequalities must be eliminated'.[5] It is not until more recently, however, that the PPP has been set out in positive terms. According this principle a hugely significant role within an adequate account of justice, Fraser argues that claims about justice are to be defended, examined, and reconciled with each other only by reference to their capacity to serve such a principle. As such, in Rawlsian language, it 'represents *the principal idiom of public reason*, the preferred language for conducting democratic political argumentation'.[6] Moreover, whilst in the context of her critique of Habermas, Fraser considered parity of participation in a primarily political sense – in terms of the (im)possibility of interacting in democratic publics given the distortions of unequal backgrounds – it is now clear that she conceives of such parity as a requisite characteristic of all aspects of social life.[7]

What does this mean for cultural life in particular? For Fraser, it implies a politics of recognition aimed at the achievement of status equality for all members of society. She suggests that we should focus on the damage to status equality that occurs when one group is systematically denigrated or marginalised in cultural life. By conceiving recognition in terms of status, she emphasises the fact that 'what is really important here is … the demand for recognition of people's standing as full partners in social interaction, able to participate as peers with others in social life'.[8] The status model can entail a range of practical measures, including those to either affirm or to deconstruct group identities. This is appropriate since social identities are not 'definitively fixed. Rather, they alter over time, shifting with shifts in agents' practices and affiliations'.[9] Accordingly, rather than being fixated by the need to protect distinct and fixed group identities, the status model is more open-minded: 'the status model links recognition claims to the normative standard of "participatory parity". As a result, it forces us to consider what exactly is needed in any given case in order to establish status equality'.[10]

Fraser's approach to recognition politics, then, aims to achieve equality within what she calls the 'status order' of a society. This can be defined as the institutionalized pattern by which society accords cultural recognition to some groups at the expense of others, with the result that a more or less stable status hierarchy ensues. However, conceiving recognition in terms of the status order raises a number of problems. Fraser argues that a distinguishing feature of late-modern or post-modern times is 'the existence of forms of status subordination that do not resemble the classical model, which was developed for "traditional" societies. Far from comprising a single stable pyramid of relatively fixed status groups, today's status order is a fluid and contested composite of multiple crosscutting cultural distinctions'. The implication is that we need 'a new conception of status that befits a globalizing world of intense cultural hybridization and contestation'.[11] Fraser indicates that she has made a

'preliminary effort' at this, but that work remains to be done.[12] This theoretical honesty is to be commended, but we would argue that there is a more difficult problem at hand. We shall claim that Fraser underestimates the problems that this hybridity, multi-dimensionality and contestation poses for the task of specifying the prerequisites of participatory parity.

The Horizontal Complexity of the Status Order

In this section, we elucidate Fraser's account of the complexity of modern status orders. We find this account broadly persuasive. Agreeing with her that such orders are highly complex, we suggest that this makes it very difficult to ascertain the preconditions of parity in practice. Fraser begins by observing that different sorts of society have different sorts of status order. In pre-modern societies, a single, homogeneous and authoritative order of value may have determined the honour enjoyed by each individual by reference to their location in a status hierarchy.[13] In contemporary capitalist societies, by contrast, things are very different. As opposed to their more simple predecessors, contemporary status orders exhibit considerable complexity. What we shall call *horizontal complexity* has a number of dimensions. First, contemporary status orders are 'institutionally differentiated' since there are a variety of social sites – including the family, the institutions of the law, education and religion – which exhibit relatively autonomous patterns of cultural value.[14] In the absence of a single authoritative set of cultural values, effectively enforced by a single institution, there are a number of relatively autonomous status hierarchies corresponding to a range of different social spheres. Second, contemporary status orders are 'ethically pluralistic' since a wide variety of communities of value exist, each of which has its own 'evaluative horizon'.[15] Partly as a result, such orders are 'intensely contested': given the great diversity of value communities, criticism of dominant values is an enduring fact of social life.[16] Third, each element of the status order is 'hybridized' in the sense that different sets of values may borrow from each other, particular sets are liable to split and recombine, and new forms emerge and then mutate over time. As a result of this hybridity, 'it is impossible to say with certainty where one culture ends and another begins'.[17]

We want to argue that these different forms of complexity make it very difficult, if not impossible, to specify what a status order allowing for participatory parity might look like. We will deal with each in turn in order to make this case. First of all, the *institutional differentiation* of contemporary status orders suggests that it makes little or no sense to speak of a single order at all. Instead, it may be necessary to acknowledge that there are a number of status orders which are to some degree overlapping but to some degree separate from one another. As a consequence of this, a particular individual may be on a par with his or her fellows in some social arenas but not in others. The same individual, with the same

overlapping set of identity-markers, may experience disadvantage at the workplace but not at home, at school but not in his or her associational life. Such complexity is likely to be endemic: in a particular society, a heterosexual woman may be able to compete on a par with heterosexual men in education but not at the workplace; as a Catholic the same woman may suffer distinct disadvantages of status relative to non-Catholics when it comes to housing but not when it comes to welfare entitlements.[18] What does this mean for the attainment of parity of participation? Fraser would presumably respond that it is necessary to achieve parity in *each* of these separate institutional spheres. However, it may be that some value patterns are incompatible with others. It is also conceivable that a political measure intended to ensure parity along one dimension of status (such as gender, religious identity or ethnicity) might simultaneously undermine parity in other sub-systems.[19] The much-discussed clash between cultural rights and women's rights would be only the most obvious example of this tension, whereby the achievement of status equality for ethno-religious minorities potentially comes at the cost of equality between men and women.[20] Although Fraser has indicated that such a dilemma might be finessed, it is not clear that it can be avoided entirely. The example of gay marriage provides further evidence of the complexity involved here. On this issue, some have claimed that the recognition of gay marriage is essential to remedy the status inequality gay citizens experience vis-à-vis their heterosexual co-citizens. Many queer critics, though, have argued that this would merely bolster the many and varied advantages that married couples enjoy vis-à-vis their unmarried co-citizens, and have rejected such a move. Queer critics tend to call instead for the deinstitutionalization of marriage, and an end to the practice whereby welfare, health and legal benefits accrue on the basis of one's identity as 'married.' In this case, ending a status inequality from one perspective runs the cost of bolstering a status inequality from another perspective.

Cases like these raise a significant dilemma, and one to which Fraser gives little or no attention. On the one hand, if the PPP requires parity in every aspect of the status order, then it has not been demonstrated that such a goal is possible given the apparently conflicting imperatives of status equality within diverse arenas of that order. Fraser simply declares, in the example of gay marriage, that either strategy is compatible with parity of participation.[21] This is rather too easy. It remains an open question whether *either* option is compatible with participatory parity if such parity genuinely requires the avoidance of status inequality in all spheres of life. If, on the other hand, some kind of trade-off must be made between one sphere or sub-system and another, we have no indication as yet of how such judgements should be guided. One possibility would be to *prioritise* status sub-systems, declaring some to be more important for parity than others. But again, there are no obvious criteria for doing so, and to make this move would require Fraser to abandon her (apparent) contention that

equal participation requires parity in all aspects of the status order. It remains to be seen how this dilemma is to be negotiated.

Second, if differentiation refers to the institutional complexity of the status order, pluralism points instead to its *ethical complexity*. Contemporary societies contain a large number of social groups, each of which may potentially have its own set of values. The resulting pluralism implies the absence of any social consensus, even in the short term, on any single set of values. Ethical pluralism suggests that the proponent of every particular value will always be criticised from the standpoint of others who defend different values. Fraser maintains that this aspect of horizontal complexity does not present a problem for her account of justice as participatory parity. Indeed, she believes that, in light of such ethical complexity, her account of justice comes into its own. This is because the PPP is said to provide a nonsectarian standard in the sense that it 'can justify claims for recognition as morally binding' on all who agree to abide by fair terms of interaction under conditions of value pluralism.[22] In other words, the PPP can identify a range of policies and practices capable of commanding the assent of all reasonable citizens. It is then for citizens to choose from amongst this range of options in inclusive democratic debate. However, we believe that this second aspect of horizontal complexity presents questions for justice as participatory parity that have not been fully addressed. To begin with, note that, in arguing that the PPP is nonsectarian, Fraser suggests that it can be directly deduced from the principle of equal moral worth, and that it is the only principle which can be so deduced. In her words, 'participatory parity simply *is* the meaning of equal respect for the equal autonomy of human beings qua social actors'.[23] On her view, it is by showing that anyone committed to the latter principle must logically subscribe to the former, that she is able to demonstrate that the PPP can be used fairly to adjudicate between all particular ethical communities in a given society. But this argument appears incomplete. What if participatory parity is only one particular interpretation of the principle of equal moral worth? There are, after all, a range of other egalitarian principles which also claim to be derived from such a principle. For example, Rawls and Dworkin have each developed quite different accounts grounded on precisely the same appeal to the equal moral worth of individuals. If these rival accounts have any plausibility, then Fraser has not made clear why citizens committed to equal moral worth might not still reasonably reject participatory parity. If so, we may be left without an agreed upon standard of justice capable of delimiting the choices of citizens in democratic debate. And if the PPP is not generally accepted as a fair standard of adjudication, then how can it be used to determine what range of interventions in the status order is required by or at least compatible with justice?

Third, Fraser's emphasis on the *hybridized* character of the status order acknowledges that contemporary societies lack fixed and stable sets of cultural values. It would be

impossible to disagree with this part of her account of the contemporary status order. It is clear that institutionalized patterns of cultural values are always liable to change. What defines a particular group at one moment in time may cease to be of relevance to them at another; new cultural forms appear over time as existing sets of values emerge and mutate. We argue that this final aspect of horizontal complexity will make it even more difficult to know how to apply the PPP. To begin with, note that in order to apply this principle it may be necessary to assume the existence of relatively stable status groups. It must be possible, on this view, to identify a particular group suffering from a status inequality in order to know what parity requires in a given case. But the fact of hybridization undermines the assumption of fixed group identities within a stable status hierarchy. This produces a tension, which can best be illustrated by way of an example. One that Fraser herself discusses is that of *l'affaire foulard* in France (the controversy over the legitimacy of Muslim schoolgirls wearing the veil at school). In recent years the veil has become a highly contested symbol of Muslim women's identity in France, the UK and elsewhere. The recognition of cultural hybridity, however, reminds us that it is impossible to predict reliably whether it will remain so in the future. If French sub-cultures are liable to change, if values vary across different institutional spheres (including education and religion), and between different cultural communities (including Muslim and non-Muslim), and if as a consequence there is an endless clash of values, then an answer to our first question – is it possible to infer from the PPP a precise account of the status that justice demands in particular circumstances? – is likely to be difficult to reach. Interestingly Fraser implies that, precisely *because* the meaning of the foulard is subject to disagreement within the Muslim community, its presence in public institutions should be tolerated.[24] But this seems to defend a broadly affirmative policy option (the state should endorse the public wearing of the veil) on the basis of a denial of consensus about its worth. Such affirmative strategies (see below) usually depend on a more fixed view of cultural difference than Fraser is willing to provide. The point of this example is, again, not to claim that there is a fatal flaw in her scheme. Rather, the conclusion to be drawn is that the full recognition of the hybridity of cultural forms may make it more difficult than Fraser has thus far acknowledged to specify an appropriate solution to such problems.[25]

The Vertical Complexity of the Status Order

We now want to argue that the problems facing Fraser's account are intensified once we take into account what we shall call vertical complexity. By vertical complexity, we refer to Fraser's distinction between the 'deep' and 'superficial' sources of status inequality. She contends that both economy and culture (and presumably political life too) have the equivalent of a base and a superstructure. That is to say, both have deep structures and

surfaces, where the structure determines or at least shapes the nature of the surface. In terms of the status order, for example, we can say that we need to distinguish between the outcomes produces by the status order, and its 'underlying generative framework'.[26] This distinction underpins the contrast Fraser makes between 'affirmative' and 'transformative' political strategies. While the former tackles 'end-state outcomes', the latter tackles 'root causes' and so entails changing the deep structure which determines those outcomes in the first place.[27] In the case of the politics of recognition, an example of an affirmative strategy would be what Fraser refers to as "mainstream multiculturalism":[28] this involves affirming the value of the identities of groups which are currently devalued. An affirmative strategy thus alters the status of particular groups whilst leaving the status order itself intact. By contrast, a transformative strategy would engage in "deconstruction": to critique and undermine existing patterns of cultural value in order to create 'a shifting field of multiple differences'.[29] Application of this strategy would leave no identity intact. We could make a parallel point about the gulf between 'cultural feminism' – which is presumably an affirmative strategy – and postmodern feminist approaches which aim to deconstruct dualistic accounts of gender difference.

However, while we endorsed Fraser's account of horizontal complexity (albeit with greater emphasis on the problems it poses for her account), we consider her claim that culture possesses a deep structure and a shallow surface to be seriously under-theorised. In fact, Fraser offers very little by way of direct justification for this claim. Instead, she appears to believe that, since it is possible to distinguish transformative and affirmative strategies, it follows that culture and economy must have depth and surface. In other words, Fraser begins from the observation that some political measures utterly transform the sphere to which they are applied, whilst other measures only alter them a little. From this observation, she infers that the former must affect the deep structure of that sphere, while the latter only affects its surface. But scant evidence is offered for this contention. What is present is merely the observation that some cultural interventions (and some economic reforms) have more profound and longer lasting effects than others. Different strategies have different effects, at different levels, over different distances, and over different periods. But this observation, while incontrovertible, gives insufficient support to any formal distinction between two types of political strategy corresponding to two levels of the status order. A firm distinction between the strategies of transformation and affirmation relies on the existence of a coherent distinction between deep structure and superficial allocation. Such a distinction, which is simply assumed in Fraser's analysis, may not be sustainable.

We would argue that these difficulties are multiplied once horizontal complexity is brought back into the picture. Recall the key dimensions of the horizontal complexity of contemporary 'structures of prestige'. First, the contemporary status order is 'institutionally

differentiated' in the sense that there are a range of social sites with their own patterns of value. What implications does this have for vertical complexity? One possibility is that, in spite of this differentiation, there still exists one status order with a single deep structure and shallow surface. Yet if institutional differentiation is taken seriously, this seems unlikely. In this case, another possibility is that each particular social institution would have its own deep structure and shallow surface. This would include *inter alia* the institutions of the family, law, education and religion. But Fraser has offered no proof that each of these institutions possess such vertical complexity. Second, today's status order is 'ethically pluralistic' in the sense that there are a wide variety of communities of value. Again this has implications for vertical complexity. If ethical pluralism did not undermine the idea of one status order, then this order could have a single deep structure and surface. However, since the fact of pluralism renders this unlikely, this would suggest that each ethical community would have its own deep structure and shallow surface. But once more Fraser offers no evidence to support this idea. Third, the structures of contemporary status orders are 'hybridized' in the sense that cultural influences continually flow across social boundaries – where this presumably includes the boundaries of both social institutions and ethical communities. If this aspect of Fraser's analysis were accepted, it would have further implications for vertical complexity. In particular, it could undermine her assumption that structures control allocations. How could there be a stable relationship between structures and allocations if culture is a continuous process of multiple flows rather than a relatively fixed structure? The point is that Fraser's typology of political strategies is contingent on a social-theoretic claim about the vertical complexity of the status order that has not yet been substantiated. And if, as we believe, there are reasons for scepticism about this social-theoretic claim – if, that is, the assertion that the status order can straightforwardly be said to have a base and superstructure is unsupported – this will have serious implications for her typology of political strategies. This is precisely what we intend to demonstrate in the next section.

Participatory Parity and Political Strategy

Thus far the general thrust of our argument has been that, in the light of both the horizontal and vertical complexity of the status order, identifying the preconditions of participatory parity will be very difficult. Our objective in this section is to reinforce this conclusion, but to do so by coming from a somewhat different angle. Here our aim is to consider the second question posed in our introduction: namely, is it possible to specify a detailed and consistent political strategy to achieve participatory parity? Fraser herself clearly believes that it is essential to answer this question in the affirmative, for two reasons. The first is a general reason that should concern any political theorist: the need to demonstrate that her theory is not

utopian in a negative sense. The second is more specific to Fraser, and is implied by her assumption that an appropriate conception of critical theory requires that the normative and the practical are interlinked in some suitably intimate way. In this section, we contend that a further type of complexity makes the formulation of a detailed and coherent political strategy to achieve participatory parity extremely difficult. Once Fraser's analysis of *unintended and perverse effects* is taken into consideration, the generation of a such a strategy is rendered more difficult still. This, in any case, is what we shall argue here.

Before beginning this argument, it is important to note that in the last decade or so Fraser's views on political strategy have changed considerably. To be specific, a once clear preference for transformative strategies has weakened and an idea of 'non-reformist reform' has come to take their place. Her original thesis was that the best combination of strategies to achieve justice was that of deconstructive (i.e. transformative) approaches to cultural difference, and socialist (i.e. transformative) approaches to economic issues.[30] Both operate according to the same logic: if they are successful, the disadvantaged group in question will no longer need to be a subject of attention or will actually cease to exist as a group. However, her earlier strong commitment to transformation has now weakened considerably. To begin with, her current position on economic change exhibits no clear preference for either affirmative or transformative strategies.[31] Whilst she had originally opted squarely for socialist transformation, Fraser now simply declares it to be an 'open question how much economic inequality is consistent with parity of participation'.[32] In terms of recognition, her preference is no longer for affirmation or deconstruction, but a strategy which seeks to minimise the subordination experienced by some groups whilst leaving it 'to future generations to decide whether a given distinction is worth preserving'.[33]

In place of the earlier transformative political strategy, Fraser has come increasingly to rely on the idea of 'non-reformist reform'.[34] This is intended to soften the contrast between the strategies of affirmation and transformation. Non-reformist reform, she contends, is able to set in train a trajectory of change so that, in the right circumstances, a series of measures which appear to be affirmative in the short run, may lead to transformation in the long run. One example would be a Basic Income strategy which Fraser plausibly suggests as a tool for embedding an affirmative approach to economic justice that might over time facilitate a more radical transformation.[35]

In general terms, Fraser's move away from strategies which are clearly either affirmative or transformative may be a legitimate response to the difficulty of specifying the nature of vertical complexity (where affirmative strategies affect 'surfaces', and transformative strategies affect 'deep structures'). However, Fraser's hope that non-reformist reform names a way of realizing justice as participatory parity faces its own problems. Two such problems are identified by Fraser herself, although once more our claim will be that she

has not fully acknowledged the difficulties they pose for her project. First, there are what she calls 'perverse effects' in which a reform achieves effects that thwart its initial goals.[36] In particular, strategies to improve recognition may lead to worsened outcomes from the perspective of redistribution, or vice-versa. One example would be 'affirmative remedies for maldistribution' that 'often generate backlash misrecognition' thus making the matter worse rather than better for the intended beneficiaries of such affirmative redistribution. Another example would be 'no-fault divorce reforms, which appeared to dovetail with feminist efforts to enhance women's status' but which 'have had negative effects on the economic position of some divorced women'.[37] Second, Fraser also refers more generally to 'unintended effects' in which a reform applied to a particular sphere inevitably has consequences beyond that sphere. She argues that 'neither claims for redistribution nor claims for recognition can be contained within a separate sphere. On the contrary, they impinge on one another in ways that can give rise to unintended effects'.[38] In short, it is impossible to enact a policy of recognition that does not affect redistribution and vice versa.[39]

Fraser appears to assume that awareness of these potential problems is sufficient to counter the unintended and sometimes perverse effects which they may generate. She also appears to consider such effects to be relatively contained and predictable. Thus it is possible to trace the consequences of a particular recognition strategy (thereby identifying unintended effects), and it is possible to determine when those consequences are likely to harm efforts to realize justice (thus identifying perverse effects). But we believe Fraser underestimates the problems that these effects pose for her political strategy, and in particular for her idea of non-reformist reform. In fact, we see no reason to be confident that these effects can be predicted and thus taken into account in the way that she imagines, for reasons which we have already raised. To begin with, there are problems presented by what we have called the horizontal complexity of the contemporary status order. Fraser suggests that there is a multiplicity of cultural institutions and value communities, with cultural flows across them, and particular sets of values being used to criticise others. If one puts a particular cultural policy into practice in these circumstances, what are the chances of predicting what further effects it will have beyond its immediate sphere of application? If, for instance, the state endorses same-sex marriage, what impact might this have on various communities of value, when each of them have very different attitudes to this policy? What impact will this change have on other social institutions (including the family), ethical communities, and processes of hybridization? Beyond this, what effects will all these cultural changes have on patterns of economic distribution and political power? In turn, each of these effects will have further effects on different aspects of the status order, economic system and political constitution of society, as the impact of the initial change has wider effects across society. Fraser's (somewhat uncertain) account of what we have called the vertical complexity of the status order presents

its own problems for the proponent of non-reformist reform. If we are unable to make a coherent and systematic distinction between deep and superficial political strategies, then it is more difficult to predict the extent to which a particular political intervention will affect a particular aspect of the status order – whether this is a particular social institution, ethical community or process of hybridization. As we argued in the previous section, such difficulties are multiplied once both axes of complexity are considered in conjunction with one another. In light of these reflections, we have less confidence that these various and complex effects can be predicted in the way that Fraser imagines. Unintended and/or perverse effects make it far harder to predict that a single step taken in a particular direction is likely to lead to further steps being taken in the same direction. This in turn has consequences for the ready applicability of 'non-reformist reform' as a plausible strategy for realizing Fraser's conception of justice. Our argument, then, is that the complexity of the status order poses distinct problems for the strategy of non-reformist reform, given its reliance on cumulative and sometimes indirect effects. As a result, it is not yet clear whether the political strategy of non-reformist reform can overcome the obstacles posed by the complexity of the status order.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have focused on the principle of parity of participation, which lies at the centre of Fraser's theory of social justice. As a work in progress, there are many questions about this principle the answers to which can be expected to become more clear over time. For instance, is parity to be measured at each specific moment in time? Or is Fraser demanding parity across individual life courses? Is parity to be measured across generations? Just how do we decide who one's peers are in a given context? Moreover, there are important questions about whether Fraser's account of the principal dimensions across which parity of participation are to be secured – that is, the class order, the status order, and the political constitution of society – divides up social life in a useful and appropriate way.[40] For our present purposes, we remain agnostic on these issues.

The general aim of this paper has been to reveal some serious obstacles to applying the PPP in practice. The initial sections of the paper focused on the problems presented by the vertical and horizontal complexity of the status order. Fraser has made the important point that the contemporary status order(s) are complex in various ways, and that theorists committed to some form of status equality need to theorise this complexity, and show how status equality might still be delivered in the face of it. But there are formidable challenges to be faced if such a task is to be completed. We have argued that Fraser is right to point to

(what we have called) the horizontal complexity of the status order. But we have also claimed that this will make the application of the PPP much more difficult than she imagines. The differentiated, pluralistic and hybridized character of contemporary status orders, with their overlapping and discontinuous sub-systems, will make it more difficult than she appears to recognise to specify what participatory parity would require in given conditions. The latter sections of the paper addressed (what we have called) the vertical complexity of the status order, and emphasised the difficulties presented by unintended and perverse effects for Fraser's attempt to identify a political strategy capable of realizing parity of participation. She contends that non-reformist reform is a political strategy which is capable of avoiding the Scylla of affirmation and Charybdis of transformation. We argued that the naming of this strategy is thus far an act of wishful thinking, for it is not yet clear whether the strategy of non-reformist reform can overcome the serious obstacles that Fraser herself has identified.

Putting these two aspects of the argument together, our intention is not to show that her conception of justice as participatory parity, or the broader political project in which this is embedded, must be abandoned. The complexity of the status order would present problems for any political project which aims deliberately to change it in order to secure justice; and unintended and perverse effects present obstacles to any political project of any kind. But if parity of participation requires equality within the status order, work on thinking through the implications for that principle of the multi-dimensional complexity of the status order has only just begun. It is not yet clear how, given this complexity, status equality could be defined or secured, and Fraser has set herself a significant challenge precisely in working to reveal the problems faced by her own account. Thus the task of addressing the nature, and implications, of status complexity remains a daunting one.

Notes

[1] Nancy Fraser (2003) 'Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation' in Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, p. 36. London: Verso.
[2] Nancy Fraser (2003) 'Distorted Beyond all Recognition: A Rejoinder to Axel Honneth' in Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth (n.1), p. 231.
[3] Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth (2003) 'Introduction: Redistribution or Recognition?' in Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth (n.1), p. 4.
[4] Nancy Fraser (2000) 'Rethinking Recognition', *New Left Review* 3: 107-120. Nancy Fraser (2001) 'Recognition without Ethics?', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 18: 43-55.
[5] Nancy Fraser (1990) 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', p. 65. *Social Text* 25/26: 56-80.
[6] Fraser (n. 1), p. 43, italics in original.

7 See e.g. Nancy Fraser (1997) 'Heterosexism, Misrecognition and Capitalism: A Response to Judith Butler', *Social Text* 52/53: 279-289, 280.

8 Nancy Fraser, Hanne Marlene Dahl, Pauline Stolz and Rasmus Willig (2004) 'Recognition, Redistribution and Representation in Capitalist Global Society: an Interview with Nancy Fraser', *Acta Sociologica* 47: 374-382, 377. For a detailed analysis of Fraser's critique of the identity model, see Simon Thompson (2006) *The Political Theory of Recognition: A Critical Introduction*, ch. 2. Cambridge: Polity.

9 Nancy Fraser (1997) *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition*, p. 152. London: Routledge.

10 Fraser et al (n. 8), p. 377.

11 Ibid, p. 378.

12 Ibid.

13 Fraser (n. 1), p. 51.

14 Ibid. pp. 55-56.

15 Ibid. p. 56.

16 Ibid. p. 56.

17 Ibid. p. 55.

18 It might be objected, of course, that the institutional differentiation of society is not incompatible with the existence of a single status order: individuals might move between one social sphere and another, but find that an interlocking status hierarchy sees them labelled as superior or inferior wherever they go. But if this last example has any empirical resonance (and unfortunately we cannot pursue the issue further here), it will suggest that institutions are differentiated in evaluative terms too, so that different institutional settings will see different evaluations placed on the same identities. If this is so, then a single status order cannot be said to exist.

19 Also of relevance here is our discussion of unintended and perverse effects in Section 4.

20 Susan Moller Okin (1999) *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women*? Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

21 Fraser (n. 1), p. 39.

22 'Recognition without Ethics' (n.4), p. 27.

23 Fraser (n. 2), p. 231.

24 Fraser (n. 1), p. 42.

25 This point is further developed in Section 4.

26 Fraser (n. 9), p. 23.

27 Fraser (n. 1), p. 74.

28 Ibid. p. 75.

29 Ibid. p.76.

30 Fraser (n. 9), p. 31.

31 Fraser (n. 1), p. 69.

32 Ibid. p. 101.

33 Nancy Fraser (2004) 'Institutionalizing Democratic Justice: Redistribution, Recognition and Participation', in Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser (eds) *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment: Essays for Richard J. Bernstein*,, pp.125-147, 139. London: MIT Press

34 Fraser (n. 1), pp. 78-82.

35 Ibid., pp. 78-79.

36 See e.g. Fraser (n. 9), p. 26.

37 Ibid. p. 65.

38 Ibid. p. 64.

39 It may be noted that with Fraser's more recent introduction of a distinct political dimension to justice, the chances of such effects occurring are multiplied.

40 Here, most critical attention has focused on the utility of Fraser's distinction between economy and culture. One of the authors of this paper has argued elsewhere that there are indeed reasons for doubt about her social-theoretic analysis of society, and that as a consequence the PPP can be defended without resort to the culture/economy distinction and also, presumptively, to the recognition/redistribution framework. See Chris Armstrong (2008)