2 Cannibal Venice: Analysis of the Water City in the Anthropocene

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2.1 Introduction

We live in an era of increasingly convergent crises. Ecological collapse, democratic erosion, deteriorating care networks and rampant inequality are too severe to be addressed as separate emergencies and they represent parallel symptoms of a deeper structural disorder. The theoretical framework of Nancy Fraser's Cannibal Capitalism (2023) offers a powerful lens to interpret the overall picture: capitalism is not a mere economic system, as it is widely defined, but rather a form of society that feeds off the very conditions that make it possible in the first place, undermining its own prerogatives of possibility in the long run.

This essay arises from a central question: in what ways does cannibal capitalism manifest in a concrete urban context; and are there powerful sites of resistance within it that hold potential for radical change? To explore such questions, the city of Venice serves as a paradigmatic case study. With its historical exemplary management

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of land and water, its dependence on the tourism industry, its seemingly unstoppable demographic collapse and the fragility of its threatened ecosystem, the Water City incarnates in a dramatic and intensified form the boundary struggles described by Fraser.

Through an interdisciplinary methodology that combines political critical theory, urban studies and social analysis, the first two chapters apply Fraser's framework to the Venetian context, interpreting phenomena such as overtourism, environmental degradation, social reproduction crisis and the hollowing out of democratic institutions as expressions of the capitalist system's intrinsic contradictions. Finally, the third chapter introduces the project of *Ri-Pensare Venezia*, interpreted as a holistic attempt to resist the city's commodification and at the same time to reclaim it as a living, inhabitable space.

Therefore, to re-read the city of Venice through the cannibal capitalism's paradigm means not only to expose the structural violence and inefficiency of neoliberal capitalism, but also to identify possible counter-hegemonic, bottom-up responses.

2.2 Nancy Fraser's Cannibal Capitalism

Anyone would agree on the fact that today we are going through an unprecedented period of crisis, which does not only encompass the realms of politics, economy, ecology, or society, but compounds them all together. Periods of instability have existed throughout the whole development of human history, but today's era of turmoil has a peculiarity of its own: it concerns the entire social order, as calamities of various kinds converge, intersecting and exacerbating one another.

From a Western perspective, although not exclusively, the present is marked by economic stagnation, together with increasing inflation – phenomenon referred to as stagflation – fueled and at the same time exacerbated by growing inequality and spreading precariat. These dynamics, combined with the erosion of public welfare systems, outcome of the neoliberal assault towards social reproduction, are leading to a spiraling detriment of living standards for the vast majority. At the same time, the current ecological collapse is generating a cascade of consequences around the world, among which famines, environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, escalation of extreme weather events, health crises and forced mass migration. This complex scenario is further aggravated by the proliferation of armed conflicts, systemic dispossessions, genocides and the rise of racism, ideological extremism, neo-nationalism, xenophobia, and political polarization. Despite the different nature of these struggles, they seem to share one common root cause: Capitalism.

Capitalism is commonly defined as an economic system based on free waged labor, private property of the means of production, market exchange and profit accumulation. However, many scholars, among which the critical theorist Nancy Fraser, consider it too narrow of a definition. In one of her most recent works, Cannibal Capitalism (2023), she investigates a much expanded definition, describing it as a type of society in which economic factors and activities are flanked and supported by other non-economized ones such as social reproduction, exploitation of nature, political power and wealth expropriation from the Global South. These dimensions are vital background conditions for the functioning and the very existence of the capitalist economy, yet they are systematically neglected and devalued within its dominant discourse. Doing so, capitalism undermines the very conditions that make its reproduction possible, in Fraser's words "like the ouroboros, it eats its own tail" (Fraser 2023, xv).

Each sphere is currently undergoing its own individual crisis: social reproduction is experiencing a crisis of care rooted primarily on gender inequality; politics is marked by a general crisis of democracy, fueled by the widespread rise of populism and extremism; the global environment is under severe threat from climate change; and the exploitative nature of financial capitalism is exacerbating inequality worldwide. These seemingly distinct crises are all grounded in hierarchical dualisms – center/periphery, production/reproduction, human/non-human, private/public – that reflect deeper power dynamics inherent to capitalism, which structurally find its expression through various forms of domination, often sustained by cultural hegemonization processes that reproduce these dichotomies. Each dualism perceives the periphery, the non-human, the public realm, and care work as occupying subaltern positions compared to their counterparts, misleadingly considered as more 'productive' and therefore more valuable (Fraser 2023). Analyzing the ways in which these dualisms generate inherent contradictions, and at the same time intersect and reinforce one another, allows for a deeper understanding of the nature of capitalism, hopefully paving the way for the identification of potential points for transformative intervention.

Fraser's analysis collects in a single picture various kinds of oppressions and struggles such as class exploitation, gender domination, racial subjugation, and environmental dominance, all coming from inherent contradictions of the capitalist system. It is evident that such contradictions simultaneously produce not only periodic economic crises – as famously theorized by Karl Marx – but also environmental crises, crises of care and political crises, which do not only happen individually, but also intersect one another, creating what Fraser calls "boundary struggles".

Production, for instance, intersects social reproduction in conflicts involving care, either private or public, remunerated or unpaid.

Land exploitation intersects expropriation in struggles over 'race', migration, and neo-imperialism. Perpetual accumulation logic butts up against the factual limited availability of natural resources, sparking struggles over land, energy, and biodiversity. Lastly, governance crises arise where global markets and big corporations clash with national states and public institutions, creating tensions over nature, authority and sovereignty of political power, ultimately undermining democracy.

Let us dive into each struggle and their respective boundaries one-by-one.

2.2.1 How Capitalism Relies on the Wealth Expropriation from its Periphery

According to Nancy Fraser, capitalism has been inextricably linked to racialized forms of oppression since its historical emergence in the sixteenth century. The consolidation of the capitalist system occurred alongside colonial expansion, slave trade and the extractivist exploitation of non-European territories. For this reason, the capitalist system has depended not only on exploitation in its narrow sense – i.e., the Marxist conception of extraction of surplus value from waged labor – but also on what Fraser refers to as expropriation: the illegitimate seizure of labor, land, and resources from populations considered inferior by means of race, culture or 'civilization degree'.

In this framework, Fraser rejects a contingent relation between capitalism and racial oppression, while arguing instead for a structural correlation (Fraser 2023). Through racialized logics, populations in regions labelled as 'peripheral' – both at global and national level – have been persistently dispossessed, subordinated and subjected to economic arrangements that transfer wealth to the 'center'. In her account, such expropriation takes several interlocking forms, such as predatory debt, land and resource dispossession, unequal exchange and unequal global value chains.

At the same time, global financial institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank and other private creditors, supposedly instituted to foster the Global South's development, have been deeply criticized for funding postcolonial governments on onerous terms: when they are unable to pay, they are forced into Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) which privatize, deregulate and cut social spending, transferring wealth from entire populations into the pockets of international investors and corporations, creating debt. This way, tax revenues previously dedicated to social protection and public spending are diverted to deficit compensation. Compounded with austerity policies, the vicious cycle is completed, and the social, economic and political requirements for development are cut at the base (Fraser 2023).

Fraser also highlights how global value chains constitute a contemporary form of racialized expropriation: labor-intensive manufacturing is frequently outsourced to countries in the BRICS bloc and other semi-peripheral regions, where labor is cheap and protections are weak. Multinational corporations therefore extract low-cost inputs – both labor and raw materials – from the Global South, while capturing most of the value at the higher ends of the chain through activities like finance, marketing, branding, and technological innovation concentrated in the Global North. Environmental expropriation follows similar paths: Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from the Northern economies often involves ecologically destructive practices such as over-extraction of natural resources, water contamination, carbon emissions, toxic dumping and land degradation. Yet, accountability is unevenly distributed, as the Global North frequently externalizes the ecological costs of its economic activities to the Global South, allowing itself to appear 'cleaner' and thus blaming environmental accountability on the latter. This dynamic, which Fraser frames as an ecological dimension of racialized expropriation (Fraser 2023), reflects and reinforces longstanding colonial hierarchies, even as it intensifies the material effects of climate change on the most ecologically vulnerable populations.

Finally, even those developing countries that opted for import-substitution end up expropriating what they on their account consider 'periphery', meaning indigenous and peasant communities, in order to build infrastructures and/or expand plantations, ultimately undermining their own populations and ending up being locked in a destructive loop, revealing the deep contradiction at the heart of capitalism, i.e., its dependence upon forms of social cooperation, environmental stability, and political legitimacy that it simultaneously corrodes.

Fraser's analysis of expropriation closely relates with Cedric J. Robinson's theory of racial capitalism, according to which Western capitalism emerged from racialized European feudalist roots and could not have developed without the racial discrimination and domination of the "non-Europeans" (Robinson 2000). Subsequently, he links the transatlantic slave trade of the mercantilist era of capitalist development directly to the economic expansion of Western capitalism, showing how slavery not only was normalized and legitimate, but also an essential feature of capitalist accumulation. His work complements Fraser's emphasizing how the historical and on-going extraction and expropriation of wealth from the Global South is inseparable from the logics of racial domination embedded in capitalism itself. In fact, Robinson states that capitalism is not a neutral economic system corrupted by racism, but rather one that is fundamentally structured by racial oppression, something that Fraser points out multiple times throughout her framework development.

To sum up, Fraser's analysis reveals how capitalism is not simply a system of wage labor and markets, but a civilizational structure rooted in expropriation. Racialized domination is not an accidental or transitional feature of global capitalism – it is constitutive. Understanding this is crucial for developing a transformative politics capable of confronting not only exploitation, but also the deeper, more insidious logics of racial capitalism, environmental depletion, and systemic dispossession.

2.2.2 Structural Gendered Oppression in the Social Reproduction Sphere

Discussions surrounding the current poli-crisis have been predominantly focusing on the environmental and economic crises, while neglecting social reproduction, indispensable precondition for the very existence of capitalist production (Fraser 2023). In a capitalist economy, social reproduction plays a very narrow and specific role: it serves to produce and replenish the working class, even though it is itself considered as 'unproductive' within mainstream economic frameworks (Fraser 2023).

The gendered division of the public and the private sphere has intensified during the industrial era, where men assumed the role of primary breadwinners, and women were relegated to unpaid care work within the household. This division of roles institutionalized an unequal power dynamic: the one who performs reproductive work is systematically subordinated to the one who earns the wage that sustains the family, even though it is the latter activity that depends on the former in the first place (Fraser 2023).

In other words, capitalist economic production is inherently dependent on social reproduction, as it cannot self-sustain, but despite its aim at commodities production and profit accumulation, it extensively relies on a large variety of social practices that reproduce both human life and workforce – activities that take place primarily out of the market sphere and that are for this reason often invisible at the eyes of mainstream economic analysis. These practices include biological reproduction, childrearing, emotional support, education and transmission of cultural and social norms, housework, etc. Such practices, largely carried out in the private sphere by women and marginalized communities, ensure that workers are born, raised and socially integrated in ways that make capitalist production possible. Without this indispensable labor, neither workforce, nor consumers, nor even a society would exist.

Simultaneously, neoliberal political economies led to the gradual structural dismantling of public services and social facilities. Beginning in the 1980s, with the rise of financial capitalism, austerity policies, privatization, and deregulation measures gained traction,

leading to the withdrawal of state support from essential institutions such as healthcare, education, childcare, elderly care, and housing; shifting the burden of social reproduction onto individuals and families, especially women – although not exclusively, who are socially conditioned and expected to absorb care labor without guaranteed access to sufficient time and resources.

In addition, the market expansion of precarious and flexible labor, characterized by lower salaries, job insecurity and the weakening of social protection, exacerbated the conflict between the demands of remunerated employment and social reproduction responsibility. This is particularly evident in the contemporary phase of financial capitalism, with the birth of 'two-earner household': the achievements of the second-wave feminist movement in securing women's entry into the labor market occurred without addressing the enduring burden of social reproduction, which remained largely on their shoulder, resulting in what is referred to as a 'double burden'. Neoliberalism in this way has played a checkmate on women's liberation, labelling itself as 'progressive' and celebrating diversity, meritocracy, and emancipation, while simultaneously dismantling social protection measures (Fraser, Arruzza, Bhattacharya 2019). Women were expected to receive the same treatment as men in the formal, productive economy, but no reconfiguration of the reproductive sphere was ever taken into consideration.

Care labor, in this context, is widely perceived not as a shared social responsibly, but rather as a burden that women must carry, something minimized or outsourced in exchange for individual freedom. This is what happens in Global North countries, where social reproduction needs often rely on transnational care chains, with the employment of migrant women, usually from the Global South or other areas considered peripheral. The global care economy provides in this context a clear illustration of Fraser's description of capitalist social reproduction's cannibal logic. The American professor Arlie Hochschild (2015) introduced the concept of "global care chains" to describe how women from poorer countries migrate to wealthier ones to perform domestic and care labour, often leaving their own families behind, shifting the care gap to their countries of origin (Hochschild 2015). This phenomenon is evident for example in Italy's reliance on migrant women – especially from Eastern Europe, the Philippines and Latin America (DOMINA, 2021) – to serve as live-in caregivers, demonstrates how the global division of care work reproduces colonial exploitation schemes and reinforces systemic hierarchies rooted in race, gender and class. The use of the term colonial in relation with the exploitation of unpaid women's care work was firstly introduced by Rosa Luxembourg in 1913 and later on by the German Sociologist Maria Mies, who, in her book Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale (2014), anticipates Fraser in

describing how Colonialism, the Patriarchy and the rise of Capitalism are deeply interconnected aspects of the same historical process. According to her, Capitalism was built on the colonization of women, nature and colonies, all exploited as invisible foundations of capitalist accumulation and considered irrelevant in economic theory despite being essential (Mies 2014).

Patriarchal Capitalism thus comes into being and reproduces itself through colonization processes that affect both bodies and the natural environment: from domestic labor essential to the workforce reproduction, to unpaid agricultural and subsistence activities, and the systematic extraction of 'free' resources from nature and the Global South. This system is further upheld by a legal and political apparatus that not only legitimizes such dynamics of exploitation and subordination but is itself affected by the logic of capitalist accumulation, therefore contributing to its perpetuation.

Over time, the inherent contradiction between capitalist accumulation and the sustainability of social reproduction generates recurrent crises, manifesting in the collapse and shortage of care infrastructures, demographic decline, widespread mental-health deterioration, and general instability. With the progressive erosion of social protection measures, entire societies face growing conditions of unsustainability: housing crises, privatization of care facilities and burnout diffusion put at risk the very fundamental conditions for human life and economic productivity. When the basic needs of life are no longer met, the social foundation of the capitalist system begins to unravel.

Capitalism, then, splits production from social reproduction, attributing value and recognition to the former only, cannibalizing care work without caring for its replenishment, ending up jeopardizing its own very conditions of possibility and thus revealing an inherent tendency to social reproduction crises. This internal contradiction demonstrates that care practices cannot continue to be neglected and devalued, as they represent a necessary precondition for a capitalist economy.

Fraser finally stresses that there is an urgent political need for recognition and reorganization of social reproduction, not as a marginal or subordinated realm, but as a central terrain of discourse, where alternative, new life-affirming systems can be imagined and constructed (Fraser 2023).

2.2.3 Capitalism And Its Structural Predatory Attitude Towards the Ecosystem

In the last few decades, climate change has become one of the main subjects of the global political agenda's debate. Everyone, from higher institutions to the media and all the way to single citizens, seems to finally recognize the urgency of the current situation: extreme

weather events, desertification, rising sea levels and biodiversity loss are plain for all to see. Yet, as widely stressed by Nancy Fraser, despite the widespread general agreement on the scientific basis of climate crises, a real common view on the actions required to stop it – and ideally reverse it – is completely lacking, and this is where the most profound differences emerge.

Fraser challenges the dominant narrative that attributes environmental accountability on humanity as a whole – a concept that has been condensed in the definition of Anthropocene (Crutzen, Stoermer 2000) – stating that, rather, those who are actually responsible, are specific social classes and economic logics historically determined. In particular the capitalist class is licensed by the system itself – together with the aforementioned preconditions that make it possible – to freely dispose of nature as both an infinitely replenishing source of land, water, energy, etc. and, at the same time, a bottomless dump for waste (Fraser 2023). To support her claim, she describes how different historical phases of capitalist development, from early mercantile capitalism to the current neoliberal phase, have each undergone their own specific form of environmental damage, reproducing a deeply extractive and hierarchical relationship between humans and nature.

While Fraser criticizes the universalizing narrative of the Anthropocene for neglecting capitalism's central role in ecological degradation, other scholars go deeper: Jason W. Moore, for instance, proposes the term "Capitalocene" to more accurately reflect the systemic origins of climate collapse in capitalist economies, questioning whether we are really living in the 'age of man' or rather in the 'age of capital' – the historical era shaped by endless accumulation (Moore 2017). From his perspective, environmental depletion is not merely a byproduct of industrialization, but a constitutive feature of capitalist expansion, visible for instance in the deforestation of the Amazon for cattle exports or the lithium extraction in the Atacama Desert for the development of 'green' technologies (Riofrancos 2023). Such perspectives expand Fraser's argument by revealing how ecological expropriation and economic growth are linked, even in supposedly 'sustainable' innovation.

In fact, the current environmental crisis does not appear out of nowhere, but it is the cumulative result of centuries of growing environmental degradation. From the colonial deforestation of the sixteenth century to industrial monocultures, from the mining industries of the nineteenth century to today's 'green' digital economy, each phase of capitalism has reproduced itself through a new mode of environmental devastation. What is peculiar about today's era of financial capitalism, as Fraser argues, is its reliance on global capital that circulates and operates completely constraint-free, shifting its ecological and political costs to places where it

is most convenient. This results in an escalating acceleration and multiplication of past crises, now converging into a single, enormous planetary emergency (Fraser 2023).

Here, Fraser's central concept of cannibal capitalism becomes key: the author invites the reader to think the capitalist system as a self-devouring machine, one that reproduces itself by systematically consuming its very conditions of possibility that lie outside of the economic realms – nature, care work, labor, democracy. In the environmental sphere, this translates into nature being not only exploited, but actually effectively transformed into a free productive input and, simultaneously, a global sink of waste pushed to collapse. Ecological cannibalization is therefore structural, and manifests itself by means of resource exhaustion, loss of biodiversity, climate destabilization, and, in general, the Earth's declining ability for self-replenishment.

In this context, multiple environmentalist movements – historically and geographically situated – have tried to resist to these dynamics. Through the Sixties and the Seventies, the North American ecological movement introduced a new diffused conscience around industrial development limitations, whereas Indigenous peoples' struggles in Latin America, such as Guaraní's and Mapuche's, have proposed radically alternative views to the extractivist paradigm. Further examples can also be the pacifist Chipko movement in India, which in the early 1970s resisted deforestation in the Himalayan region by symbolically hugging trees at the cost of their lives (Shiva 1988); and in African countries, women as Wangari Maathai – first environmentalist to ever win a Nobel Peace Prize – have guided campaigns for re-forestation and environmental justice. Moreover, most recently, global movements such as Fridays for Future or Extinction Rebellion have reported the ecological emergency in the squares and streets of western metropolis. Nevertheless, Fraser criticizes these movements – although without delegitimizing them – for still struggling to go beyond a narrowly environmentalist perspective, ending up isolating the ecological crisis from its broader economic and systemic causes.

It is in this gap that Fraser stresses the necessity for a new ecopolitics, one that is both "trans-environmentalist" and "anti-capitalist" (Fraser 2023). With 'trans-environmentalist', the author refers to an approach going beyond traditional environmentalism, which tends to focus excessively on nature's preservation or carbon emissions reduction without further questioning the foundations of the capitalist system. 'Trans-environmentalism', on the contrary, acknowledges that the ecological crisis is deeply intertwined with social, economic and political crises, thus requiring a much transformative action capable of addressing them conjointly. In opposition to capitalism's predatory logic, then, trans-environmental

ecopolitics aims at breaking the cannibalistic loop by placing concrete limits on accumulation, and by bringing reproduction of life and ecological justice to the center of the discussion, contributing to the transformation of the entire socioeconomic paradigm.

This approach also distinguishes itself from the so-called 'green capitalism', i.e., the mainstream agenda that aims at reconciling capitalist growth and environmental sustainability through technological innovation and market activity in general. Fraser strongly criticizes this vision, that she considers as a sort of 'greenwashing': superficial management of environmental symptoms which maintains intact underlying power dynamics (Fraser 2023).

According to her, an authentic post-capitalist, radical ecopolitics must therefore reject the logic of endless growth and promote forms of production and social reproduction that are de-marketed, democratic, and consciously respectful of planetary limits.

2.2.4 Capital's Dependence On – And Rejection Of – Political Power

The fourth core contradiction of capitalism identified by Nancy Fraser concerns political power. Capitalism depends on political institutions for the legal framework and institutional mechanisms that legitimize and sustain it, however, at the same time, it systematically undermines them (Fraser 2023). For instance, capitalism requires a legal system to uphold private property rights, contract law and corporate protection. Yet, once such systems are in place, large corporations often lobby to weaken these very structures, such as by pushing for deregulation to avoid accountability.

Capitalist economies also require regulatory frameworks, like environmental protections and labor laws, to function smoothly. However, capital tends to oppose such measures in pursuit of cost reduction. Simultaneously, firms depend on human capital, infrastructures and healthcare systems, typically funded by the state. Under the neoliberal wave of privatization, however, these public institutions are increasingly subordinated to logics of capitalist accumulation (Fraser 2023). Moreover, corporations benefit from public services and goods financed through taxation, while simultaneously attempting to circumvent the very system that funds them.

Thus, the political sphere is not external to capitalism, nor is it merely regulatory: it is a fundamental condition of its existence. Yet, it is also one of its victims. Capital tends to hollow out political institutions, reducing them to instruments of private accumulation rather than expressions of collective will. In this way, capitalism cannibalizes the public sphere, subordinating it to market imperatives

and stripping it of the capacity to regulate the economy in public interest (Fraser 2023).

This process reflects one of Fraser's central arguments: capitalism thrives through structural separations: between production and reproduction, society and nature, economy and politics. The separation of the economy from politics results in the depoliticization of fundamental economic decisions, which are driven by profit maximization rather than the fulfillment of collective or public needs. Fraser defines this dynamic as the capitalist tendency to devour political power in service of private interests, thus generating periodic political crises (Fraser 2023). These crises are not anomalies; they are the logical outcome of a system that, in the name of endless accumulation, erodes and destabilizes the very institutions that legitimize it. Public power, both national and transnational, is reduced to a mere facilitator of market dynamics. Consequently, democratic legitimacy is weakened, paving the way for rising distrust in political representation and the growth of authoritarian and populist forces.

Fraser's diagnosis of capitalism's parasitic relationship to political institutions mirrors Antonio Gramsci's concept of "passive revolution" and "crisis of hegemony". According to Gramsci, dominant social orders do not respond to legitimacy crises handing over power, but rather they reorganize it in technocratic or authoritarian directions, this transformation process "from above" allows the élites to neutralize social conflict and thus preserve their position of power (Gramsci 1975). Fraser, in an analogous way, analyzes how capitalism devours democracy by, for instance, undermining the welfare state, promoting technocratic management or delegating decision-making powers to non-elected entities – such as the ECB, IMF, etc. This is a clear example of passive revolution: power reorganizes itself to adapt and face the crisis, without actually being radically questioned. On the other hand, Gramsci talks about "crisis of hegemony" – or "crisis of authority" – when dominant classes loose the mass' consensus and their power starts to be doubted, meaning that the masses start to question the paradigm and a period of crisis is coming, wherein a new, alternative force must rise and substitute the current one, but does not yet exist. This results in a period of stalemate, uncertainty, and conflict. Such crisis, in Gramsci's words, consist precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born (Gramsci 1975). Fraser mirrors this idea in her earlier work called, precisely, The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born (2019), where she addresses the political and democratic crisis of neoliberalism, which hollowed out public institutions from their representative function, generating uncertainty, distrust, populisms and authoritarian regimes. As Gramsci, Fraser also identifies a transitional period of crisis in which the capitalist domain loses legitimacy but nevertheless perpetuates through new forms of control. As noted, the political crisis is only one aspect of a

broader systemic crisis that also includes ecological destruction, the collapse of social reproduction, and economic volatility (Fraser 2019).

Fraser argues that each historical phase of capitalist development has been shaped by – and has responded to – political instability. Yet, she emphasizes, the current phase of neoliberal capitalism is particularly cannibal. Neoliberalism has promoted the outsourcing of public services, the deregulation of financial markets, and the curtailment of democratic control – all under the rhetoric of efficiency and modernization. The real outcome, however, has been the hollowing out of democratic institutions, which are increasingly incapable of addressing the social and ecological crises that capitalism itself generates.

Fraser also stresses that capitalism is fundamentally undemocratic (Fraser 2019), not only in its relationship with political institutions but also in the social power structures it creates. Vast wealth inequalities translate into political inequalities. The mainstream claim that 'consumers vote with their wallets' is inherently skewed: those with greatest purchasing power effectively have more 'votes'. Capitalists use their economic power to dominate public discourse, shape political agendas, and finance candidates, thereby distorting democratic representation and steering political decision-making toward plutocratic ends.

In summary, one of Fraser's key contentions is that capitalism is inherently anti-democratic. The capitalist economy operates as a form of "unpolitical private power," systematically excluding democratic deliberation over crucial matters. Decisions about how to allocate surplus, which sectors to develop, and how to distribute resources are left to market forces or technocratic elites, rather than subject to democratic control (Fraser 2023). Democracy, from the perspective of capital, is tolerable only as far as it does not interfere with the imperative of endless accumulation.

In response, Fraser does not advocate mere reformism. Instead, she calls for the creation of a counter-hegemonic project that unites struggles against economic exploitation, ecological destruction, gender oppression and racial marginalization. This project must aim at systemic transformation: reforming capitalism is not enough. What is needed is a post-capitalist social order that reintegrates politics, care, the environment, and democracy as ends in themselves – not as resources to be exploited.

2.2.5 Boundary Struggles

As insofar described, contemporary capitalism is undergoing a general crisis, characterized by intertwined and mutually reinforcing rundowns across key societal sphere – social reproduction, the environment, politics, and the economy – that can no longer be

treated as isolated, single-issue problems. Rather, there is a need for a strategy to assess them in a combined and strategic way; one that is, first of all, anti-capitalist. This necessity is rooted in the fact that capitalism treats its non-economic background conditions as if they were, in fact, economic – cannibalizing them through commodification.

The sphere of social reproduction is undergoing a crisis of care, generated by a contradiction rooted in the institutional separation between production and reproduction. It is characterized by gender domination and implies gender violence as well as the exploitation, devaluation and neglection of feminized care labor.

The sphere of nature is undergoing an environmental crisis of epochal dimensions, and it is rooted in the institutional, positivist separation between human and non-human nature, presuming the domination of the former on the latter. It is characterized by the treatment of nature as a free input source and, at the same time, an endless, ever-replenishing sink for waste. The ongoing ecological emergency is probably the most threatening among the others, as the collapse of the ecosystem would immediately pose at risk the very possibilities for life itself.

The political realm, at the same time, is facing a breakdown of democratic legitimacy, governance, and public power as expression of collective will. The current neoliberal phase of capitalism undermines state capacities to protect the other background conditions from capitalist predatory activity. The contradiction that generates the crisis lies primarily in the wave of privatization and commodification of public spaces and discourses, reducing the public and political sphere to mere tools at service of accumulation and private appropriation.

Finally, labour exploitation is deepened at a global level by ever-growing inequality, based on various forms of wealth expropriation from the Global South that go together with racial oppression. Indeed, capitalism relies not only on wage labour but also on the ongoing dispossession of communities below the global color line through extractivism, land grabs and detriment, dispossession, and exploitation. These processes reinforce a center/periphery dynamic, where wealth is systematically transferred from racialized and/or marginalized populations to core capitalist powers.

It is also important to underline that these 'boundary struggles', while rooted in capitalism's structural contradictions, do not evenly affect different social groups. Rather, they tend to disproportionately impact those who are already occupying a position of vulnerability and especially those who find themselves at the intersection of multiple axes of oppression, i.e., migrant people, people of color, queer people, disabled people, etc. This uneven distribution of social costs reveals how intersectionality as a lens allows us to understand how race,

gender, class, migration status and ability degree intersect to create compounded vulnerabilities. Fraser herself, especially in later works and interviews (Fraser, Maiguashca, Masquelier 2024), has pointed out that power and resistance must be theorized considering these intersecting oppressions, rather than along isolated axis. Her theory of justice – based on combined redistribution, recognition, and representation – resonates closely with the work of other scholars such as Iris Marion Young and Nancy Naples, paving the way for addressing multiple levels of injustice (Fraser, Naples 2004; Dorrien 2021).

Fraser multiple times stresses the fact that these contradictions do not operate in isolation but interact and exacerbate one another in such an intimate and intricate way that none of them can really be understood when considered on its own (Fraser 2023). Land and ecosystems detriment directly compromises the material condition for care and everyday life. When air and water are polluted, and land is made infertile, it becomes impossible to sustain healthy families and communities whatsoever. Environmental disasters and desertification are causing the displacement of entire populations, forcing especially women, children, and elderly people to migrate, often leading to situations of growing uncertainty and violence. Moreover, despite the evidence of the current situation, climate refugees are still not recognized by the international law system, further exacerbating their insecurity. Thus, the environmental crisis is deeply entangled with the social reproduction crisis, as when capital jeopardizes the former, also jeopardizes the latter. At the same time, it is public powers that legitimize and provide the means for capital's predatory attitude on communities and ecosystems, and it is that same institutions that people turn to when in danger. For this reason, struggles that are both social and environmental, are inevitably also political. Finally, Fraser concludes, the just-mentioned dynamics are deeply intertwined with expropriation as well. By appropriating the land for its often predatory and extractive activity, capital expropriates entire human communities of the material basis for their very subsistence, generating simultaneously a crisis of social and ecological nature (Fraser 2023).

In those parts of the world where ecological collapse is relatively not-so-evident, i.e., the Global North, the rise of neoliberal capitalism has de-powered democratic institutions, shifting decision-making power from public governance to unaccountable market forces driven by the exclusive logic of accumulation. States often serve capital interests, through deregulation, tax heavens and austerity policies, while repressing dissent and failing to guarantee basic social protection measures. This undermines both legitimacy and sovereignty, pushing away the people from the political space as they feel disempowered and disposable. On the other hand, the expansion of low-wage and precarious labour – especially in care sectors – reveals

the parasitic relation between capital and reproduction, as the former exploits the latter while refusing to remunerate it or support it adequately. As – especially but not exclusively – women and working-class people are forced into paid labor behind the threat of starvation without any corresponding social care service, the reproduction of life itself becomes precarious and unsustainable, pushing it towards breakdown.

These crises historically and periodically take place, since whether social, natural, or political, none of these spheres is ruled by capitalist logics – such as growth, efficiency, accumulation, merit, negative freedom, etc. – but rather follows an ontological grammar of its own. For instance, social reproduction values ideals of care, mutuality, community, and solidarity; nonhuman nature, much similar to social reproduction, values safeguard, time, patience, care, and justice; polity practices are oriented towards democracy, self-determination, and collective autonomy (Fraser 2023). This implies that although these background conditions are essential for capitalist realization of commodity production, labor exploitation and capital accumulation, they cannot be subjugated to their sole economic function *ad infinitum*. For this reason, Fraser contends that throughout the entire history of capitalist development there have always been moments of turmoil characterized by some sort of 'resistance' of these non-economic spheres. According to her, it is their very core that lurk potential agents of critical change, that, despite them being constantly attacked and plundered, continue resisting.

In this perspective, the socio-ecological crises produced by cannibal capitalism fall most heavily on precarious workers, women, racialized populations, Indigenous peoples, undocumented migrants, and all those excluded from political representation or economic participation. These categories are not just victims; but they are also often the primary agents of resistance, precisely because they experience the contradictions most acutely. For this reason, it is essential to listen to their voices first when imagining alternative solutions.

Italian scholars such as Filippo Barbera have contributed to this reflection by highlighting how current capitalism exacerbates vulnerability and invisibility, from an Italian perspective. Barbera analyzed how neoliberalism offloads systemic risks onto fragile populations who are denied both protection and recognition (Barbera 2016). This reinforces Fraser's point: the crisis of capitalism is not just universal and systemic, but selectively brutal onto those who already find themselves in a condition of vulnerability and/or oppression.

Fraser concludes her analysis by stressing the necessity for an emancipatory movement that not only embraces the Marxist ideals for class liberation, but also feminist, ecological, political, anti-imperialist, and anti-racist. A real "counter-hegemonic" project of social transformation.

To recap, the author frames said 'boundary struggles' as both symptoms of capitalism's contradictions and sites of resistance and potential change. These conflicts arise at the intersection of care, ecology, and sovereignty, where the commodification logics of capitalism are challenged and alternative value systems are proposed. For example, the Zapatistas movement in Chapas, Mexico, and the Rojava autonomous administration in Northern Syria, both advance projects that explicitly rethink care, gender roles, ecology, and direct democracy outside the capitalist paradigm. Moreover, feminist scholars such as Silvia Federici have emphasized that resistance and community in the reproductive sphere, through for instance communal kitchens, neighborhood assemblies, or mutual aid networks, can already preface alternative forms of life beyond the market (Federici 2012). These struggles, while situated in their own space and time, can be seen as catalyzers of what Fraser calls "counter-hegemonic" projects: they not only react to crises, but actively propose emancipatory futures that de-link human life and well-being from capital accumulation.

Thus, understanding how intersectionality, inequality and vulnerability interplay and are embedded in boundary struggles is not a marginal concern but it is essential to imagine viable alternatives to the current paradigm. A truly counter-hegemonic project must incorporate the voices of those at the margins, putting them at the center of discourse for the realization of an emancipatory political vision.

Starting from this framework, the next chapter will delve into the specific case of the city of Venice. Apparently distant from the canonical sites of global capitalism, Venice instead embodies, in peculiar and intensified forms, the same cannibalistic dynamics described by Fraser: expropriation of value through mass tourism, the hollowing out of the public and political spheres, a crisis in social reproduction, and the endangerment of the lagoon's ecological balance. Analyzing Venice through the lens of Cannibal Capitalism thus implies understanding how systemic contradictions manifest at the urban and local level as well, suggesting the urgent need to radically rethink our ways of inhabiting, producing, caring, and governing.

2.3 The City of Venice and the Ways in Which it Cannibalizes Itself

Venice, whose founding dates back to more than a thousand and six-hundred years ago, has a rich and complex history, inextricably linked to its lagoon. Established as a shelter on lagoon islands and developed through a delicate equilibrium between land and water, Venice was for a long time a mercantile power, with a deep knowledge of the surrounding environment.

This fragile equilibrium, however, began to unravel with the advent of industrial modernity and, in particular, with the construction of Porto Marghera in 1917. The post-war transformations of the twentieth century, together with pivotal events such as the catastrophic flood of 1966 known as 'Acqua Granda', marked the beginning of a prolonged process of depopulation of the historic center and an increasing dependence on tourism as the city's primary source of wealth.

Today, Venice is frequently cited as an emblem case of overtourism, as well as urban and ecological fragility. As a socio-ecosystem shaped by centuries of interaction between anthropogenic and natural elements, the city now finds itself at the crossroads of multiple overlapping and self-feeding crises, the most threatening of which seems to be the irreversible rise in sea levels. An amphibious city and UNESCO World Heritage Site, Venice is a privileged location for critical analysis within the framework of the Anthropocene, or as Stefano Beggiora and Serenella Iovino put it, a planetary kaleidoscope for all the dynamics that characterize the Anthropocene (Serenella, Beggiora 2021). The purpose of this chapter is to frame Venice as a concrete space in which the four structural crises of capitalism identified by Nancy Fraser manifest themselves.

The crisis of expropriation emerges in the commodification of the city for external consumption, often to the detriment of its own local population; the crisis of social reproduction manifests in the steady demographic decline, the displacement of residents, and the gradual erosion of the city's social fabric; the ecological crisis is blatant in the degradation of the lagoon's equilibrium and the vulnerability of the local ecosystem due to oppressive anthropogenic intervention; and finally, the political crisis unfolds through governance ineffectiveness, institutional inefficacy and the subordination of public decision-making to private economic interests. As described in the previous chapter, these diverse crises do not take place as separate phenomena, but are deeply interconnected, and it is impossible to overcome them by treating them separately.

Let us delve into each sphere's particular characteristics, to later address them in the general picture and identify 'resisting' elements that can function as potential incubators for radical change.

2.3.1 Tourism Monoculture, Wealth Expropriation

The economic structure of the Metropolitan City of Venice offers a clear illustration of the crisis of expropriation as Nancy Fraser describes it: a process through which value is systematically extracted from a territory and its inhabitants, without being reinvested in their own development and for the benefit of their collective life (Fraser 2023). Professor Marina Garcés, in a conference held in Barcelona in 2014,

describes precisely how the tourist economy, through its extractivist logic, differences little from colonial economies. The two dimensions in fact share economic dependence, the intensive exploitation of a finite resource, a form of development that produces wealth but instead of redistributing it, it centralizes it, the disintegration of the social fabric, making rents – i.e., passive income – the most desirable expectation of wealth, and, finally, the oligarchic – not to say plutocratic – concentration of decision-making power (Gracés 2014).

As one of Italy's most iconic tourist destinations, Venice has, particularly in recent decades, become an infamously paradigmatic example of touristification. As other tourism destinations victims of their own success, the city suffers the consequences of uncontrolled tourism growth, leading to a radical transformation of commercial and residential structures, as well as the depauperating of its very social fabric. This phenomenon has drastically intensified in the last few decades, with the explosion of peer-to-peer short-term holiday rental platforms such as Airbnb and Booking.com, which have proliferated across the entire historic city (Bertocchi, Visentin 2019) as well as the mainland. In 2021, the number of daily presences on the main island was estimated at around 100.000 visitors – a threshold that will be later on often exceeded – while a recent study on the city's tourism carrying capacity suggests that the optimal number should be approximately 52.000 (Bertocchi, Camatti, Giove, van Der Borg 2020).

Such dynamics have been having devastating consequences for both Venice's social structure and its natural environment, rendering the city increasingly inhabitable not only for residents but also for the delicate ecosystem of the lagoon. Locals feel more and more like strangers in their own city, witnessing the erosion of essential services in favor of tourist-oriented amenities. The unregulated proliferation of restaurants, bars, souvenir shops and hotels inevitably restructured the local job market, making it increasingly difficult to find employment outside the tourism sector.

The city's progressive transition to tourism monoculture in terms of employment and lifestyle has produced an economically fragile and highly dependent system. The vast majority of available jobs are low-skilled, low-waged, and precarious, either related to tourism production chains or shipbuilding. In this whole picture of less qualified jobs, it is important to notice how these positions are often occupied by women, migrants and students, whose labour remains underpaid, invisible, and easily replaceable. Indeed, although tourism is often considered a high-productivity sector, it is typically characterized by low net wages, which limits its capacity to foster long-term economic growth (Musu 2001). This phenomenon further exacerbates dynamics of spatial segregation of migrant and low-income people to the peripheral zones of the Metropolitan City, mainly

Mestre and Marghera, accentuating insecurity and social instability in such areas in particular (Fondazione Gianni Pellicani 2024).

Workers sense, the expropriation of value does not occur solely through the material dispossession of those people who cannot afford to live in the ever-more expensive historical city where they often – although not exclusively – work, but also through the racialized and gendered segmentation of the labour market, where entire categories of workers are confined to marginal roles whose ultimate function is to sustain the candid and impeccable city's tourist image, while remaining excluded from both its governance and benefits. At the same time, the wealth generated by mass tourism – which in 2023 comprehensively spent around 939,34 million Euros in the City (ANSA, 2024) – is largely siphoned off by external agents such as multinational hotel chains, peer-to-peer hospitality platforms and private real estate investors, through mechanisms of deregulated markets, fiscal elusion and privatization of public assets.

Concisely, the widespread prevalence of precarious work, the housing crisis, the increasing living costs of the island and the growing commodification of urban spaces, have profoundly altered the Venetian social fabric. Indeed, significant segments of the resident population have been marginalized or effectively displaced, ultimately eroding the very conditions that once made Venice a living city.

2.3.2 The Crisis of Care in a Hollowing Venice

The most blatant crisis that Venice is going through nowadays is a crisis of social reproduction. In a city progressively hollowed out from its inhabitants, what is missing is not only the locals' presence but the very conditions that permit daily life and reciprocal care. As underlined by Nancy Fraser (2023), contemporary capitalism is rooted in structural expropriation of reproductive activities, often rendered invisible and devalued, but that nevertheless constitute the precondition of economic production and capital accumulation: without care work, no economic system would be able to self-sustain. In Venice, social reproduction has been thinned out and/or progressively dislocated, marginalized, and undermined.

The great residential exodus that characterizes the entire city and especially the historical center is not merely the result of economic and urban-planning dynamics, but symptoms of a deeper, structural social crisis. The data speaks for itself: according to the Municipality of Venice (2024), in 1951, the island reached its peak in number of residents, with 174,808 inhabitants in the historical center; in 2024, less than 30% remain, with only 48,489 people. The city center, once a place of dwelling, has become a hollow shell, stripped of its essential social elements. Community and neighborhood relationships, local

services, caring facilities for children, elderly people and those more vulnerable categories of people have been progressively dismantled. The closing of schools, daycare centers, clinics, shops, and gathering spaces is not casual: it is a direct indicator of the disappearance of the social fabric. Notably, districts like Cannaregio and Castello – traditionally among the most populus – have been hit the hardest by the disappearance of services (Bertocchi, Visentin 2019). Moreover, this erosion is strictly linked with the city's geography: those who can afford to remain in the historic center do so at great cost, while those who cannot are forced to move to Mestre or Marghera, more residential areas – although increasingly gentrified – but characterized with growing insecurity and service inadequacy.

Today's situation is anything but surprising if one looks back at nineteenth- and early twentieth century Venice: a deeply unequal, unhealthy, ghostly city, and yet one of *forestieri*'s (foreign visitors) favorite destinations. Thomas Mann, in his *Death in Venice* (1911, 291), offers a perfect image of that era:

> That was Venice, the cajoling and dubius beauty—this city, half fairy tale, half tourist trap, where art had once voluptuously run riot in the putrid air […] he also recalled that the city was ill, but concealing its illness out of greed.

The architect and urban planner Paola Somma, in her work *Non è Città per Poveri* (2024) thoroughly describes how the city's recent history is deeply shaped by class zoning. She explains how the ruling classes have systematically worked to empty, de-urbanize and 'sanitize' the city of its poorer residents, an essential process in enabling promoting the full exploitation of Venice's land value potential and today still on-going.

Within this context, care work suffered a double process of precarization and invisibilization: on the one hand, it is increasingly outsourced to migrant women, often under informal or precarious conditions. On the other hand, informal forms of care – embedded in neighborhood networks, associations, and volunteerism – have been left alone to cope with public disinvestment. According to the DOMINA observatory on domestic work (2024), ISTAT estimated that in Italy, around 3,3 million people are irregularly employed in this sector, the vast majority of which are women. This shift of social reproduction towards the private or informal sphere is not casual: it represents a structural offloading of responsibility by public institutions, placing the burden of crisis management on families and, above all, women.

The lack, or even absence, of structured public policies to guarantee housing, care, education, social spaces, and services

makes clear the state's and local administrations' disinvestment in social reproduction. As Bertocchi and Visentin (2019) observed, while productive sectors linked to tourism and logistics are in constant and rapid expansion, there is a lack of planning aimed at supporting the quality of life, especially of those who habitually reside in the city.

Venice is not an isolated case, as other cities around the world are suffering the same dynamics, but perhaps it constitutes one of the most blatant evidence of the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism, who, in order to pursue the accumulation of profit at all costs, is willing to sacrifice life itself. To resist this trajectory today means reclaiming the city as a space for shared life, connection, and reproduction; it means placing care at the center of discourse.

2.3.3 The City that Sinks: Between Ecological Fragility and Infrastructural Violence

Its fragility has always been a hallmark of the city of Venice. An inherent vulnerability, historically romanticized by its nostalgic and decadent traits that for centuries have seduced and inspired artists and writers from around the world. However, in the eyes of those who habitually reside in the city, the atmosphere is anything but romantic; what emerges is a structural crisis that intertwines environmental degradation, infrastructural violence, and climate change.

Among the main causes of this ecological drift lies infrastructural violence, by-product of a 'philosophy of engineering', meaning the construction of large-scale works meant to save the city – historically a virtuous example of land and water management – but which end up worsening the situation in the long-run. The modern emblematic example of such philosophy is the MOSE project, a system of mobile gates able to shield the city from the highest floods, active since 2020 after fifty years of planning. Entirely paid by the Italian government for €6 billion, it is both one of the largest public works and corruption cases worldwide. Ever since its entry into function in 2021, it has been proven highly effective, but it is clear today that the progression of climate change is advancing so rapidly that the MOSE can no longer be considered a long-term solution (Giupponi 2022). Its implementation was accelerated after the exceptional flood (*acqua alta*) of November 2019, warning of a phenomenon that is set to become increasingly frequent and violent, a product of the combination between sea level rise and land subsidence, which make Venice one of the world sites most threatened by climate change (Capitani 2022). In addition to these phenomena there is that of wave motion, caused by the passage of large cruise ships through the Giudecca Canal – today no longer in vogue, thanks to public protests and the efforts of the No Grandi Navi Committee – as well as the city's maritime traffic, which contribute

to bank erosion and soil salinization, damaging historic buildings and making maintenance more and more difficult and expensive. The Stockholm Water Prize 2023 Andrea Rinaldo paints a dramatic picture of such phenomena, claiming that in the span of only sixty years, the city will inexorably rot, and the lagoon disappear (Rinaldo 2024).

Another, earlier, example of last-century technocratic mentality is that of Porto Marghera, founded in 1917, which marked the beginning a new phase in the city's history: that of industrial economic growth and that of 'bonifica umana' (*human reclamation*), i.e., the expulsion of the poor and working class from the 'rich' historical center (Capitani 2022). The first Venetian environmental movements denounced the effects of this mega-industrialization plan, which, completely lacking in regulations, procedures and protection protocols, caused profound damage to the entire lagoon ecosystem, contaminating water, soil and air, with very severe health hazards for the environment, workers and the entire population, considered as mere negative externalities (Tsionki 2022). Today, Porto Marghera's golden years are long gone, and what is left is a desolated landscape, polluted and largely abandoned, awaiting appropriate remediation policies to restore which is one of the most toxic areas in Europe. Former industrial areas, once the heart of twentieth century manufacturing Venice, now remain as open wounds, noxious spaces where nature has been compromised and ecological reconversion in only announced. The long-lasting consequences of Marghera's industrial activity do not only manifest in environmental degradation, but also through workers' illness due to the exposure to toxic substances, whose symptoms develop over time and whose infection is expected to peak between the 2010s and the 2030s (Tsionki 2022). The history of Porto Marghera offers a precious insight into capital's cannibal logic, which first exploits and intensively consumes a territory – in environmental and social terms – to then abandon it once its resources have been exhausted. In this sense, Porto Marghera shows how the capitalist exploitation of non-economic conditions (work, nature, community) not only precedes the crisis, but constitutes its very matrix.

It is not difficult to deduce, then, that the higher costs of such environmental crisis are definitely not burdened on tourists, nor large real estate investors. Rather, they weight on the remaining population, and the vulnerable categories in particular such as elderly people, the working class and the low-income inhabitants of the Metropolitan City, especially those who live in the lower floors or reside in the peripheral areas, away from the eyes of the paying tourists – according to tradition.

Everything said, it is blatant how the current crisis is not an isolated phenomenon, nor a recent one, but rather the result of a long transformation process of an entire city – i.e., a public space supposedly apt to welcome and foster human life – into a

value-producing machine, a product to be consumed, an open-air museum, whose logics are incompatible with life itself. It is the result of an urban and productive system designed for profit accumulation that relies on those very conditions that make the production of profit possible in the first place, i.e., the environment, the public spaces, and social reproduction, providing us once again with a perfect picture of cannibal capitalism. Venice's ecological collapse, then, is not only about the environment; it belongs to a system of inequality, displacement and systemic neglect.

As widely argued by the authors cited so far, the contradiction between capital and nature cannot be resolved through isolated technical fixes, rather, what is needed is a transformative popular movement, one that does not merely aim at preserving the environment, but seeks to re-think and reorganize the ways of living, producing and inhabiting the city. In the case of Venice, this means reimagining its spaces as a living ecosystem, one that cooperates with nature instead of trying to dominate it, one where environmental justice and social reproduction are not only mutually reinforcing but central pillars for long-term sustainable development.

2.3.4 "Venice is not Disneyland": Neoliberal Governance, Corporate Rationality and Democratic Erosion

The industrial bloom that characterized the aftermath of the Second World War was followed by an era of economic decline and skepticism about the techno-capitalist governance of the city of Venice began to spread. In the 1980s, with the establishment of neoliberalism, things began to change, but not for the better. Private initiative and corporate philosophy take hold, giving rise to a new trend of privatization and deregulation. The city's political institutions have gradually been hollowed out and replaced by a model of urban governance that is increasingly centralized and aligned with corporate logic, subtracting ground from democratic participation. In line with Nancy Fraser's analysis of capitalism's political contradiction, the case of Venice shows how the institutions that are supposed to regulate and mitigate capital's cannibalistic tendencies are instead coerced into serving its expansion (Fraser 2023).

This shift has produced a clear erosion of local representative institutions, as decision-making power is progressively removed from the municipal, democratic level. The governance of the city has come to resemble what David Harvey defines "urban entrepreneurialism" (Harvey 1989), a model in which public administrations behave as if they were private companies: maximizing short-term returns, managing the city as a brand, and privileging investors over its own residents.

Internal to this logic lies the so-called 'specialty of Venice': in 1973, the Special Law for the city was approved, recognizing the need to safeguard it in light of its social and environmental vulnerabilities. This legal status, initially effective in supporting the protection and revitalization of the metropolitan area (Borelli, Busacca 2020), has, over the decades, been progressively stripped out of its original meaning and increasingly used to justify exceptional measures aimed at market liberalization and the commodification of the urban space. All of this at the expenses of the residents and especially the working class, whose hardships have, in the last century, been systematically exploited to justify the 'special aid' that city needs, only for the funds obtained to ultimately benefit the wealthier classes (Somma 2024).

In this context, urban management becomes a fertile field for speculation. Public assets are sold off, planning is increasingly devoted to private projects, and what is supposed to be a common good, is commodified and rendered profitable. Citizens, residents, and social movements are systematically excluded from the processes that determine the future of the city, as their space for democratic deliberation is progressively eaten out. The clearest example of such neoliberal rationality is the recent introduction of the ticket entrance to the historic center, finally implemented starting from April 18, 2025, after decades of debate. Officially presented as a tool for regulating tourist flows, it effectively monetizes public space, transforming the city into a consumable commodity instead of addressing the problem at its roots. Thus, far from representing a break from past tendencies, this measure is the culmination of a governance model that conceives the city less as a living community space and more as a product to be consumed (Settis 2014). Rather than opposing capital's predatory logic, political governance becomes one of its enablers, and this is precisely what Fraser means when discussing capital's cannibalization of the public sphere (Fraser 2023).

Therefore, the expropriation Venice is experiencing, cannot be solely understood in economic or social terms. It is also deeply embedded in the very institutional logic that governs the city, where redistributive and participatory functions are abandoned in favor of efficiency, monetization, and managerialism. In this scenario, the city becomes an emblematic case of the fact that neoliberalism does not merely dismantle democracy but reconfigures it: replacing public participation with market logic, and citizenship with consumerism, in the name of growth, efficiency, economic liberty.

The future of the city, then, will depend not only on resisting its gradual commodification, but on reclaiming the political sphere as a space of collective discourse and cooperation. It will be useful to change perspective and promote not only the most profitable economic interests, but also the associations, grassroots initiatives, damaged economic activities such as craftmanship so that they can

fulfill their collective functions. Venice, so deeply affected by the contradictions of modernity and postmodernity, shaken by climate change and overtourism, needs to imagine new forms of political participation, able to bring back community and democracy at the center of political attention (Borelli, Busacca 2020).

Boundary Struggles in Venice: Intersecting Crises and Sites of Resistance

Venice, as described insofar, perfectly incarnates contemporary capitalism's inherent contradictions, where different crises – social, ecological, political, and economic – do not present themselves as isolated phenomena but intersect and exacerbate each other. In this context, in the Venetian reality we can detect what Fraser calls "boundary struggles" (Fraser 2023): tensions that rise where capitalism clashes with its own very conditions of possibility, meaning social reproduction, nature, the public sphere and economic relations – consuming them in the attempt to perpetuate its accumulation cycle.

To begin, the crisis of expropriation manifests itself in the continuous extraction of value from the city through mass tourism, with no effective reinvestment in its social or ecological well-being. The commodification of housing through peer-to-peer short-term rent platforms such as Airbnb has been led not only by foreign investors, but very often by residents themselves, driven by the imperative to extract value from their properties in a precarious economic environment. This vicious dynamic exemplifies a real "tragedy of the commons" (Hardin 1968): the short-term individual gain results in long-term collective harm, as the local population unintentionally contributes to the erosion – and cannibalization – of its own urban space and community. This resulted in a rapid reduction of housing offer for new residents and the consequent expulsion of entire population segments to the mainland, fueling the demographic decline and weakening the community networks that sustain everyday urban life. David Harvey calls this "accumulation by dispossession": a violent process that removes the poor to make way for profitable urban projects. This way, many cities worldwide including Venice are increasingly shaped by the desires of elites, not the needs of ordinary people (Harvey 2015).

This fuels a social reproduction crisis, characterized by the dramatic progressive depopulation of the historical center, combined with the gradual disappearance of essential community services, schools, clinics and social spaces. The real estate market logic made it almost impossible for families, young people, students, and low-income workers to live in the city, in favor of highly profitable tourist rents. This dynamic transformed Venice from an inhabited place to a walkable postcard, a showcase for tourist consumption, with a resident population today reduced to less than one third of what was in the fifties.

The ecological crisis is equally evident: the lagoon equilibrium has for decades been compromised by invasive infrastructural interventions such as the industrialization of Porto Marghera and the MOSE construction. Climate change is causing sea level rise, which is menacing the very survival of the city, whereas pollution, bank erosion and the loss of biodiversity are threatening the entire lagoon's ecosystem. In this context it is clear how environmental protection has always been subordinated to the search for economic profit, reproducing the cannibalistic logic of capitalism that consumes nature as a free, self-replenishing resource to be dominated and exploited.

Finally, the political sphere as well is undergoing a state of profound crisis: rather than counterbalancing market pressures, local institutions have often facilitated them through privatization and deregulation policies, proving a managerial and technocratic approach to the urban space, favoring the commodification of the city, which ends up being managed more as a brand than a shared commons.

Though analytically distinct, these crises overlap: the exodus of residents weakens the social fabric and community's ability to care for its environment; environmental degradation threatens the city's very existence and harms the most vulnerable; political capital 'corruption' undermines democratic potential for resistance and change. In this scenario, as Fraser (2023) argues, it is often those most exposed to the contradictions of capitalism who also generate potential powerful practices of resistance and alternative planning. In this sense, Venice is not only a city sinking in its crises, but it is also a living terrain of possibility. Numerous grassroots initiatives are actively fighting to reclaim the city as an inhabitable, democratic, and sustainable space. Neighborhood committees, such as *Comitato Grandi Navi* (Big Ships Committee) and *Poveglia per Tutti* (Poveglia for all) have recently achieved concrete victories, demonstrating a proactive civic engagement in reclaiming public spaces and envisioning participatory governance models. Professor Federica Cavallo (2016) argued that these grassroots mobilizations not only challenge the dominant corporatist paradigm but also hold transformative potential for re-thinking the Venetian urban space, reclaiming common goods, and imagining a sustainable future for the city.

These initiatives go beyond mere resistance: they actively construct alternatives, foster debate and propose new ways of actively inhabiting the city. They hold the potential for a radical transition, one that reintegrates ecology, care, and democratic participation in the urban project.

Venice, once cannibal, may become a space of regeneration through collective participation, solidarity, and community cooperation.

2.4 Re-thinking Venice to Rethink the Paradigm

In the light of the deep contradictions highlighted in the previous chapters, an urgent need is evident: not only to analyze the mechanisms through which capitalism cannibalizes its own conditions of existence, but also to imagine alternative solutions. If Venice represents such an emblematic case of systemic crisis, it can also offer valuable insights for a radical rethinking of the current paradigm.

It is within this tension between decay and possibility that the present chapter situates, aiming to gather and value some of the transformative forces already present in the city. From the experience of the *Ri-Pensare Venezia* (Re-thinking Venice) project to a re-signification of the very notion of 'specialty' attributed to the city, the goal is to outline a vision of radical change which, far from proposing abstract utopias, emerges from situated practices and concrete collective imaginaries.

To re-think Venice becomes not merely a theoretical exercise, but rather a political one, that transcends local boundaries and challenges our ways of inhabiting the world in the age of the Anthropocene.

2.4.1 The Research Project of *Ri-Pensare Venezia* and its Contributions

Ri-Pensare Venezia is a research project by the Gianni Pellicani Foundation which, since 2023, has served as a platform for discussion on the major issues facing the city. It ambitiously aims to redesign Venice through meetings, workshops, collective participation, open debates, and concrete proposals, creating a space of encounter between experts, scholars, stakeholders, association representatives and citizens, all invested in the future of the city (Fondazione Gianni Pellicani 2024).

More than just a research platform, it tries to see Venice not as something fragile to be saved, but as an active subject that can take part in shaping its own future through local knowledge and active community participation. It is precisely in this reclamation that the project aligns with the one envisioned by Nancy Fraser: to recognize the centrality and active importance of those background conditions that have been systematically appropriated and depoliticized by capitalist governance, and to envision a new socio-economic system revolving around life instead of capital.

The project so far developed around two 'focuses': the first one started in November 2023 and addressed the themes of young people, social base and job market and its report is contained in the volume *Venezia come stai?* (Fondazione Gianni Pellicani 2024); whereas the

second one, started in December 2024 and still ongoing, treated eco-welfare, urban form, culture, tourism, security and urban economy.

The results obtained from this process can be read as potential combined intersectional responses to the four systemic crises outlined by Nancy Fraser (2023): the crisis of expropriation, the crisis of social reproduction, the ecological crisis and the crisis of political power. The first one manifests through its economic monoculture overwhelmingly dependent on tourism, a sector that is surely highly productive, but which tends to siphon off more value than what is actually reinvested to sustain it in the long run (Musu 2001). Moreover, real estate speculation is directly feeding off the city's facilities that permit a stable social fabric to exist and reproduce in the first place. Against this current extractive model, *Ri-Pensare Venezia* proposes a diversified and resilient economy based on plurality, autonomy, proximity and innovation through, for instance, the reconversion of Porto Marghera into a hybrid social hub; the revival of traditional forms of craftmanship especially in the historic center; support for local enterprises and start-ups through administrative simplification and community-based economic districts; and a redistribution of tourist tax revenues towards long-term sustainable development projects around housing affordability, qualified youth employment and ecological transition. To say more, these measures could be able to foster a rebalancing of spatial relations within the Metropolitan City of Venice, re-organizing its center-periphery relations into a more equal, inclusive, and integrated system. In this view, Mestre and Marghera would become integral parts of a polycentric city, overcoming the current logics of spatial segregation and functional specialization.

The crisis of social reproduction, which is perhaps one of the most evident and urgent, manifests under the pressure of mass tourism, demographic decline, and tourist gentrification, which render the city increasingly uninhabitable (Salerno 2018). There is a need to reclaim the right to remain in the city, to access services, to inhabit it. *Ri-Pensare Venezia* addresses this urgency through, to name a few, the rehabilitation of public housing and the creation of student residences and policies aimed at strengthening public welfare and healthcare. Such measures, combined with a strategic diversification of the job market, should trigger a process of repopulation that would gradually bring back stable residents to the city, reweaving the currently eroded social fabric.

Together with the social crisis, the ecological one has made the city of Venice an infamous example worldwide. Departing from the technocratic model that has historically characterized intervention in the lagoon, *Ri-Pensare Venezia* promotes an ecological vision grounded in cohabitation, climate justice and ecological repair rather than domination; through doubling the urban green cover, the de-sealing cemented zones, and the creation of community-based climate

shelters. The vision reframes environmental issues as collective, political challenges. Rather than addressing the environmental crisis as a technical, single-issue problem, these proposals call for combined structural changes in land use, mobility, energy, and governance.

Finally, the crisis of governance and democratic legitimacy is also addressed. Over decades, decisions affecting Venice have increasingly been delegated to opaque, non-democratic bodies, from private consortia managing the MOSE (Giupponi 2022) to corporate philosophy managing heritage and culture. In contrast, *Ri-Pensare Venezia* calls for a redefinition of Venice's 'special status' as a tool for public intervention; the creation of new institutional spaces of co-decision between public actors, civil society and local communities; a participatory approach to urban planning based on shared governance and active involvement of residents; and enhanced transparency and accountability in all infrastructure projects. These ideas aim at reconnecting institutions to the city's inhabitants, re-legitimizing public action and improving public trust.

These four axes converge in a broader attempt to imagine a way of inhabiting the city that resists commodification, cultivates community, and restores the damaged ecosystem while building a cooperative and symbiotic relationship with the lagoon environment. In Fraser's terms, these proposals respond directly to those "boundary struggles" produced by capitalism's inherent contradictions, seeking to reclaim its background conditions – the environment, social reproduction, public power and the urban space – as central political terrains, and to reframe them as sites of collective regeneration rather than exploitable resources for value extraction.

2.4.2 Re-thinking the 'Specialty' of the City of Venice as a Virtuous Example for Today's World Challenges

Ri-Pensare Venezia was born in conjunction with the fifty years anniversary of the enactment of the Special Law. The notion of Venice's *specialità*, or 'special status', was enshrined for the first time with the 1973 Special Law (L. 171/1973 *Interventi per la Salvaguardia di Venezia*). This status was conceived as a legal and financial framework to recognize and protect the city's extraordinary historical, architectural and ecological value and heritage. It was meant to ensure that the state would provide Venice with adequate resources to maintain its built heritage, preserve the lagoon ecosystem and sustain the habitability of the city as a matter of national interest.

Despite the benefits obtained in the first decades, over time the original promise of this special status has lost its consistency. Established as a tool for long-term public investment has been gradually transformed into a mechanism for market liberalization

and technocratic control. After years of underfunding and political marginalization, the Special Law has been proven ineffective in addressing the complexity of the city's contemporary crises (Fondazione Gianni Pellicani 2024). In its place, a regime of centralized, vertical power has emerged, in which key urban decisions are taken by special commissioners, national agencies, or private consortia, at the expense of transparency and public accountability (Borelli, Busacca 2020).

This process mirrors what Nancy Fraser (2023) identifies as the crisis of public power: the progressive weakening of democratic institutions and their colonization by capital logics. The failure of the Comitatone – the interministerial committee meant to coordinate interventions in the lagoon – the opaque management of infrastructure projects like the MOSE, and the incapacity to regulate tourism flows or real estate speculation all testify to this profound mismatch between institutional form and urban need (Fondazione Gianni Pellicani 2024).

It is precisely against this backdrop that *Ri-Pensare Venezia* proposes a radical reframing of the city's specialità. Rather than abandoning the concept altogether, the project seeks to reclaim and re-politicize it, transforming it from a legal anomaly into a political prototype. The idea is not to restore a past version of governance, but to imagine new institutional forms that can grant greater autonomy in managing housing, public space, ecological restoration, transport and culture. More than a mere matter of legal changes, the project calls for democratic innovation: it entails the creation of new participatory structures, the inclusion of civil society and local communities in planning processes and decision-making, including the development of multi-level governance. This way, the sharing of social capital in a context of power horizontality, allows for cooperation instead of control and imposition from above, fostering participation and higher utility (Borelli, Busacca 2020).

Re-signifying specialty also requires rethinking the epistemic and symbolic status of Venice itself. In the current global imagination, the city is too often reduced to a site of loss and romantic decadence, of sinking, disappearance and death. But such imagery, while powerful, risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Against this, *Ri-Pensare Venezia* suggests a different narrative: one in which Venice is not a static postcard but a living space, a critical city with the potential of confronting the contradictions of the present. In this reframing, the city becomes a prototype to be studied, a matter of global significance.

If the city can reclaim its power to act, to decide, to generate, it may offer one of the clearest examples of how urban life might not merely resist but find ways to flourish in a time of planetary crisis. In this sense, Venice's specialty lies not in its fragility, but in its intrinsic potential – often disregarded and underestimated – to become a model of post-capitalist reconstruction in the age of anthropogenic cannibal capitalism.

2.5 Final Remarks

The case of Venice reveals the full extent of the capital's cannibalistic logic described by Nancy Fraser: a logic that extracts value from care work and social reproduction, from the natural environment, from democratic institutions and from the public space altogether. The city's gradual transformation into a theme park, with its tourism monoculture, its constant and vertiginous demographic decline, its infrastructural violence, and its political centralization, are not just negative coincidences: they are effective outcomes of a social model that subordinates life to capital accumulation.

Yet, within this dramatic scenario of erosion, beads of resistance persist. Initiatives such as *Ri-Pensare Venezia*, multiple grassroots movements or cooperative and self-governing practices represent not only rejections of neoliberal governance, but also the active construction of alternative imaginaries. These popular initiatives do not simply react, they design new social relations based on proximity, autonomy, care, participation, and community. They give political meaning to the act of remaining in the city and re-thinking it.

Nevertheless, we find ourselves at a critical crossroads. On the one hand, these bottom-up political experiences demonstrate the potential to reclaim the city and reorganize its structures around the life of its inhabitants rather than profit. On the other, they face the persistent risk of co-optation, of being marginalized, neutralized and phagocyted by the hegemonic capitalism they resist to. As such, Venice may be read as both a cautionary tale and a generative, almost heroic example: it shows the dangers of unchecked neoliberal practice, but also the potential sites of a new sustainable paradigm.

This essay does not claim to offer definitive answers, but to contribute to an urgent collective reflection. If Venice is effectively sinking, perhaps it is not only under the rising waters, but under the weight of a paradigm that draws surplus from people and nature, to later dispose of them. Rethinking Venice, then, means rethinking the entire dominant paradigm, and imagining a city and a world in which life, rather than accumulation of capital, stands at the center.

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