

Caliban and the Witch Women the Body and Primitive Accumulation (Sylvia Federici, Autonomedia 2004)

reviewed by Karl Kersplebedeb

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Women's oppression is a subject at the center of our struggle for human liberation, but serious discussions as to why women suffer distinct forms of oppression, and why rape and other violence is so important in this, have generally been beyond the scope of most left analysis. What we get instead are platitudes about "culture," "backwardness" and "personal attitudes," occasionally slipping into plain old biological determinism in materialist drag.

While there are no definitive answers yet, Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* is a welcome addition to a growing list of works that take these questions seriously from an anti-capitalist and anti-colonialist perspective. In so doing, previously "invisible"¹ forms of oppression and resistance are brought to light, and this "peripheral" question is shown to be central not only to capitalist history, but also to our unfinished quest to find a road out of it.

Antecedents

Karl Marx pointed out long ago that the transition from feudalism to capitalism required a special form of "accumulation" (or what some might call "wealth creation") that differed from the "normal" exploitation of the wage worker. He referred to this as "primitive accumulation" (primitive as in "what came first"), noting that capital came to the world "dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt."²

Marx was talking about the super-exploitation of indigenous people in the colonies and slaves in America, but "primitive accumulation" was supposed to stay "primitive," i.e. it was meant to be specific to early capitalism, to the transition away from feudalism. It was fifty years later that one of his keenest students, Rosa Luxemburg, pointed out that "capitalism in its full maturity also depends in all respects on non-capitalist strata and

¹ A problematic term, which begs the questions "invisible to whom?"

² Marx, Karl. *Capital, Vol. I.* Library of Economics and Liberty. On the World Wide Web: <http://www.econlib.org/library/YPDBooks/Marx/mrxCpA31.html>

social organizations existing side by side with it.”³ It is continually forced to suck in these “non-capitalist social strata,” and in the process “whole peoples are destroyed and ancient cultures flattened.”⁴

More recently, two different tendencies within the feminist movement have each developed ideas which, together, help throw added light on this ongoing process of accumulation. The first, centered around Selma James, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and the Wages for Housework Campaign, exposed the way in which women’s unpaid labour, especially housework, conforms to the Marxist definition of exploitation. Capitalism receives a real material benefit from this work, as it offloads the cost of maintaining and raising male wage workers on to the female proletariat.

The second tendency grew out of struggles in the Third World, where women first exposed the hidden relationship between capitalism, violence, and patriarchal oppression. These women pointed out that violence and sexism have always accompanied both the colonialism of the past and present-day neo-colonialism. It was German feminist Maria Mies’ book *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (first published in English in 1986) that synthesized many of these ideas and first brought them to the attention of First World leftists.

Drawing on the experiences of the Indian feminist movement, Mies convincingly showed how accumulation continues to depend on the unwaged labour of women and the dispossession of peasants, especially (but not only) in the Third World. This process is often qualitatively different from how Marxists traditionally understand exploitation, as it is not surplus that is being extracted but the very necessities of life, so that capitalist violence often verges on genocide. Mies argued that this has always been a necessary (but hidden) part of capitalism, and that the first people to be victimized in this way were the women who were murdered in the Witch Hunt in 16th and 17th century Europe.

This body of knowledge forms the background to *Caliban and the Witch*, which is in many ways similar to *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* but focuses much more on Europe, while bringing the author’s own autonomous Marxist perspective to bear on the subject at hand. This book is very much a history of the making of the European working class, a re-telling of the birth of capitalism, with women at the center of the story. While there is some repetition from chapter to chapter (one suspects that some of them could stand on their own), the picture painted is moving and accessible, and Federici draws on an abundance of scholarly sources. Unfortunately, while the story tends to progress chronologically, there is a lot of going back and forth by hundreds of years at a time and jumping from one country to another, which sometimes makes it difficult to grasp in what actual order and fashion certain things occurred. However, this is a minor matter, and does not detract from the story as it is told.

³ Luxemburg, Rosa *The Accumulation of Capital*; Edited by Dr. W. Stark, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd; 1951. (Originally written and published in 1913.)

⁴ Luxemburg, Rosa *The Junius Pamphlet*. Written while the author was in prison in 1915, it was published in 1916 in Zurich and distributed illegally in Germany.

Federici does not discuss distant human origins, antiquity, or indigenous civilizations before colonialism, but starts out in Europe's "High" Middle Ages⁵. The ruling class at that time consisted of the Church and the various warlords who formed a continental military caste known as the nobility. Most people were serfs: peasants who were not allowed to move from "their" plot of land, whose property and persons were not their own, who were forced to labour and submit to the authority of the lord, who was often boss, policeman, judge and executioner rolled into one.

Yet contrary to popular belief, this was a world in revolt, where the poor were winning and the ruling class was on the defensive. Serfdom would eventually be abolished, not as a result of aristocratic benevolence, but in reaction to struggles by the serfs themselves. Not only the covert "weapons of the weak"⁶ (such as sabotage, foot-dragging, theft, etc.), but also in organized armed religious-political movements that swept across the continent. These "heretical sects" attracted hundreds of thousands of people, and openly called for a classless society, often specifically rejecting gender hierarchies as well as hierarchies of wealth. Not surprisingly, there were a disproportionately large number of women among those who banded together and took up arms against the powers that be, in what Federici describes as the first proletarian international.

These women were not acting as sidekicks or girlfriends or wives, but in their own right, and for their own reasons. These are women, we are told, who "were less dependent on their male kin, less differentiated from them physically, socially, and psychologically, and were less subservient to men's needs than 'free' women were to be later in capitalist society."⁷

Women, however, were not in the same boat as men, and this division persists throughout our story, repeatedly determining the very course of European history. The fact is that with each offensive on the part of the ruling class, each advance in exploitation, women were particularly hard hit. If, as Walter Rodney wrote, "the increase in productive capacity was accompanied by increasing inequality at all stages,"⁸ then Federici shows that this also implies inequality between men and women. So medieval "women's struggles" were not separate from "class struggles" (any more than they are today), rather they were class struggles in their own right. Gender, we are told, "should be treated as a specification of class relations."⁹

Other Marxists (and anarchists) have written about the heresies, and over the past fifty years many women have shown that these revolts "had gender." Several authors have also uncovered the fact that there was a definite queer element to many of the sects

⁵ Historians consider the Middle Ages to be that period between 500 and 1500 AD. The High Middle Ages are normally dated between 1000 and 1300 AD.

⁶ I borrow this term from the book of the same name by James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak : Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale University 1985).

⁷ Federici, p. 25.

⁸ Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* p. 123.

⁹ Federici, p. 14.

concerned¹⁰. Almost one thousand years ago, these people were expressing a unity of struggle which survives in broken form even today, no matter how much assimilated queers, career women and left-wing defenders of heterosexuality may insist otherwise. So while this is not groundbreaking stuff, it all bears repeating.

These sects were the chief political alternative to feudal oppression, and the seriousness of their challenge kept on intensifying, until it took the form of actual warfare in the early 15th century. At the same time there was an acute labour shortage, an aftereffect of the plague that had killed off a third of the population one hundred years earlier. This fact in particular gave workers and peasants the upper hand in determining their labour's worth, and so wages skyrocketed, doubling and even tripling, while prices, rents and the length of the work day all dropped¹¹. As the feudal economy failed, self-sufficient communities began to form.

“‘Now is the time’ – the sentence that recurs in the letters of [peasant rebel] John Ball – well illustrates the spirit of the European proletariat at the close of the 14th century, a time when, in Florence, the wheel of fortune was beginning to appear on the walls of taverns and work-shops, to symbolize the imminent change of lot.”¹²

One gets the impression that class rule might have been overthrown, that a radically different world was within reach. If the ruling class had only stuck to its old ways...

Enter Capitalism

“Capitalism was the response of the feudal lords, the patrician merchants, the bishops and popes, to a centuries-long social conflict that, in the end, shook their power [...] Capitalism was the counter-revolution that destroyed the possibilities that had emerged from the anti-feudal struggle – possibilities which, if realized, might have spared us the immense destruction of lives and the natural environment that has marked the advance of capitalist relations worldwide.”¹³

The term “counter-revolution” should be explained, as it might be understood as a reactionary offensive to restore or maintain the status quo. In actual fact, most counter-revolutions do not do this, rather they re-organize society in a new and more brutal way; like Nazism or the Taliban, what we are really talking about is a revolution from the right.

¹⁰ While not a scholarly work, Arthur Evans' *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture: A Radical View of Western Civilization and Some of the People It Has Tried to Destroy* (Fag Rag Books, 1978) is the earliest sympathetic formulation of this argument that I know of; more recent and more scholarly works include John Boswell's *Christianity, social tolerance, and homosexuality : gay people in Western Europe from the beginning of the Christian era to the fourteenth century* (University of Chicago Press, c1980) and Jeffrey Richards' *Sex, dissidence, and damnation : minority groups in the Middle Ages* (Routledge 1991).

¹¹ Federici, p. 47.

¹² Federici, p. 45

¹³ Federici, pp. 21-22.

These analogies are chosen with care, for Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries bears a striking similarity to fascist and fundamentalist societies in our own time. Repression and control were the watchwords of the day, in fact modern medicine, psychology, demographics and the social sciences all developed at this time in a grand effort to learn how to make people “fit” into the straitjacket of capitalist relations.

As in Hitler’s Germany and the Taliban’s Afghanistan, the metaphysical nature of the human being herself was re-conceptualized: it was at this time that intellectuals separated the body from the mind (or conscience, or soul), leaving it a fleshy machine to be governed by either the disciplined individual or the State. Feelings like lust, hunger, anger and fatigue were all blamed on this “mindless” body, now described as a rebellious subject that needed to be tamed. As it came to be more and more repressed, those outside the realm of formal production – children, women, colonial subjects and people living outside of capitalism – all came to be associated with an ever-more wild, earthy, sexual and “natural” carnality. Patriarchal capitalism’s fetishes for Black and female bodies are ascribed to this process: “For the definition of blackness and femaleness as marks of bestiality and irrationality conformed with the exclusion of women in Europe and women and men in the colonies from the social contract implicit in the wage, and the consequent naturalization of their exploitation.”¹⁴

The idea of a “mind/body dichotomy” being part of capitalist relations had a certain currency in feminist and anarchist circles back in the 1980s, and Mies referred to it as a “colonizing division,”¹⁵ though without any of the explanatory rigor found here. Over the past twenty years it has never been completely abandoned, but has found itself increasingly left to the practitioners of post-modernist mumbo jumbo, relegated to the margins of most serious political analysis¹⁶. In plain language and without recourse to spiritual or flakey concepts Federici convincingly explains how this self-alienation resulted from the brutality and violence of early capitalism.

At the same time as individuals were now supposed to be disciplined and deny themselves any “unproductive” pleasures, popular culture was also being attacked by the new capitalist intelligentsia. People had previously had a communal culture that was rich in games, folklore and ritual, and this now had to be suppressed or radically re-crafted: “taverns were closed, along with public baths. Nakedness was penalized, as were many other ‘unproductive’ forms of sexuality and sociality. It was forbidden to drink, swear, curse.”¹⁷ Magical beliefs and superstitions, which often encouraged the belief that one might “get something for nothing,” were also attacked: “How could the new entrepreneurs impose regular work patterns on a proletariat anchored in the belief that there are lucky and unlucky days, that is, days on which one can travel and others on

¹⁴ Federici, p. 200.

¹⁵ Mies, p. 210.

¹⁶ I would qualify this by acknowledging that the concept has retained slightly more currency in the queer and feminist movements, and remains central to the anti-psych movement, though these movements are perhaps also less firmly entrenched in the left now than they were twenty years ago.

¹⁷ Federici, pp. 136-137.

which one should not move from home, days on which to marry and others on which every enterprise should be carefully avoided?”¹⁸

This suppression of people’s bodies and culture was the more sophisticated side of capitalist “progress,” but Federici also describes the many ways in which people were forced off of their land, including the Enclosures, the fencing off of common land which peasants depended on for their survival. Yet even once they were landless, too many preferred to take their chances in the teeming counter-culture of vagabonds, beggars and rebels than work for a wage. This led to “the introduction of ‘bloody laws’ against vagabonds, intended to bind workers to the jobs imposed on them, as once the serfs had been bound to the land, and the multiplication of executions.”¹⁹

Men Were the Key: A Tragedy in Three Acts

A careful reading of *Caliban and the Witch* allows us to see that the capitalist counter-revolution was built around male violence against women.

As noted above, class warfare repeatedly forced the Church and nobles to retreat, resorting to defensive maneuvers. It now must be added that all too often these maneuvers laid the basis for more advanced forms of exploitation and left the ruling class in a position to regain the upper hand. One way this happened was by manipulating differences within the working class, by intensifying the exploitation of some sections in order to reduce pressure on, or even buy off, other sections. This has been done time and time again within our own recent history, along the fault-lines of race, sex and nation. Federici describes this as being one part of primitive accumulation, which “was also an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class, whereby hierarchies built upon gender, as well as ‘race’ and age, become constitutive of class rule, and the formation of the modern proletariat.”²⁰

ACT ONE

The first example of this “accumulation of differences” that Federici gives is “commutation,” whereby serfdom was effectively ended in the 12th and 13th centuries, with rent and taxes replacing forced labour. This prefigured many contemporary reforms in that “like many workers’ ‘victories’ which only in part satisfy the original demands, commutation too co-opted the goals of the struggle, functioning as a means of social division and contributing to the disintegration of the feudal village.”²¹

Previously, land had been held by the serf family (not just the husband), and the terms of servitude had been hereditary; now the land was rented (generally just to the “free” man)

¹⁸ Federici, p.142.

¹⁹ Federici, p. 136.

²⁰ Federici, p. 63.

²¹ Federici, p. 29.

and the relationship was regulated by money. A very small minority who were lucky enough to live on the best plots were able to pay and even hire other peasants to work for them, but the vast majority found it difficult to pay, sometimes falling into debt, sometimes even losing their land.

This new class division had gender, and women were now often barred from possessing or inheriting land in their own name. Little wonder that they formed a majority of those who migrated to the towns and cities, and that they would be so prominent within the heretical sects.

ACT TWO

Two hundred years later, when as a consequence of widespread class revolt and the aftereffects of the plague the ruling class was again pushed to the brink, opportunism and division amongst the oppressed once more proved key. Federici explains how the rebelliousness of male workers was channeled into sexual violence, women's bodies providing a pleasant diversion and safety valve to relieve social pressure. Drawing on the Jacques Rossiaud's research about prostitution in 15th century France²², she describes a literal rape movement, whereby sexual assaults on any poor woman were now tolerated by the authorities, essentially decriminalized. At the same time, state-run brothels were established where the masses of poor landless women could earn the money necessary for their survival. (This helps to explain the "ascetism" and rejection of sex by certain medieval heretical sects – as we know from our own era, when sex is being used as a weapon, celibacy can be a liberating choice.)

Rossiaud interprets the mass raping of women as a form of class protest; the rapists often believed that their victims – often maids, servants, or washerwomen – had sex with their masters. This is one of the most intriguing parts of *Caliban and the Witch*, even though only a page or so was spent discussing it. Neither the internet nor most standard works on medieval women discuss this, so considering that Federici describes this as a *decriminalization* of rape, and as a ruling class *strategy*, more information about the previous legal situation and supporting evidence that this was a thought-out plan would have been welcome.

It would be important to examine this in greater depth as the scapegoating of women for the crimes of the ruling class is still with us: the class resentment that is subsumed in hostility to the "rich bitch," the loose woman who betrays her class (or nation), the JAP, the "daddy's little princess"... remember how Eldridge Cleaver bragged that rape was an insurrectionary act²³? Consider the following passage by Maria Mies:

"This dimension of the relationship of men of colonized countries to men of colonizing countries, I would like to call the BIG MEN-little men syndrome. The 'little men' imitate the BIG MEN. Those who have enough money can buy all those things the BIG MEN

²² Rossiaud, Jacques *Medieval Prostitution* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1988)

²³ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*

have, including women. Those who do not have enough money still have the same dreams.”²⁴

What Federici is describing in 15th century Europe seems to have been an early example of the “BIG MEN-little men syndrome,” which has since been exported to societies around the world. This was (is) not only class envy, but also a class conflict in gendered drag: male workers are offered free sex at the expense of women, for whom it spells a constant threat to any meaningful freedom at all.

This rape movement was a win-win situation for the authorities: both a carrot for the male workers and a stick for the female working class. And it was a sign of the times, for simultaneous to this rape movement a similar dynamic was playing out in regards to women’s labour. In this, too, craftsmen played a key role – campaigning to exclude women from their workshops, claiming that they were working for lower wages (lower than whom? ²⁵). So back in the 15th century, when people depended more and more on money to acquire the necessities of life, women’s ability to earn this money was curtailed to the benefit of men of their class.

“It was from this alliance between the crafts and the urban authorities, along with the continuing privatization of land, that a new sexual division of labor [...] was forged, defining women in terms – mothers, wives, daughters, widows – that hid their status as workers, while giving men free access to women’s bodies, their labor, and the bodies and labor of their children.”²⁶

One is reminded of Mies’ observation that “The process of proletarianization of the men was, therefore, accompanied by a process of housewifization of women.”²⁷

INTERMEZZO

It is here that a second question arises, one that lay hidden behind the question of violence against women: the nature of classes, and of class alliances. This is a question that Mies has tackled head on, but when Federici broaches it, her argument seems inconsistent. This does not detract from the wealth of information and insights that she does share with us, but it does leave room for misleading conclusions, so it is worth discussing.

These were cross-class alliances, whereby men separated themselves from working class women in order to ape the privileges and power of their “betters,” and yet Federici insists

²⁴ Mies, p. 167

²⁵ This complaint – still heard in anti-immigrant campaigns today, as well as in the right-wing of the anti-globalization movement – should be understood as one set of ambitious workers trying to increase the price of their skills (i.e. wage) by limiting the labour supply by excluding (and, incidentally, impoverishing) another set of workers.

²⁶ Federici, p. 97.

²⁷ Mies, p. 69.

that male workers did not really benefit from their new position, that the “state-backed raping of poor women undermined the class solidarity that had been achieved in the anti-feudal struggle.”²⁸ Furthermore, “the devaluation and feminization of reproductive labor was a disaster also for male workers, for the devaluation of reproductive labor inevitably devalued its product: labor-power.”²⁹

This is confusing, as it seems clear that some working class men most definitely *did* exploit women for their own gain. They enjoyed a formal economic gain in the form of higher wages. They benefited sexually by having increased access to women’s bodies. As women were warped through the process of housewifization, men eventually enjoyed a hidden economic bonus in that so much work that previously had to be paid for or done by the male worker himself was now done by the female houseworker. One is also reminded of what Mies wrote:

“Proletarian men do have an interest in the domestication of their female class companions. The material interest consists, on the one hand, in the man’s claim to monopolize available wage-work, on the other, in the claim to have control over all money income in the family.”³⁰

Because there is no explicit discussion of the nature of class – beyond her promising observation that gender can be a specification of class relations – it is difficult to know Federici’s rationale for claiming that these opportunistic acts were against men’s interests. Perhaps she feels that as men’s alienation and exploitation can only be solved by revolution, any behaviour that works against this goal is not in their interest; in this sense it might be said that although this opportunism was in their *personal* interests it remained against their *class* interests, but this formulation becomes unwieldy when we insist on seeing gender as a “specification of class”³¹, and unconvincing when we are given no evidence of male resistance to women’s subjugation. Men seem to have “voted with their feet,” perhaps resisting some aspects of class rule but often collaborating in new mechanisms of exploitation and oppression, so that like “whiteness” today, “maleness” in these instances seems to be *the most important* specification of class.

Whether or not the mass of men (or white people) are acting “in their class interests” really becomes a matter of what one wants to believe about the working class. From a certain philosophical perspective even the ruling class has an “interest” in abolishing class rule: it is obvious that once one has accepted the desirability of a classless non-hierarchical society, that goal seems far more alluring than waking up in this cesspool but finding out that you’ve won the lotto. But this is not usually how “class interest” is understood...

Perhaps one way to untie this knot is to acknowledge that men also must also have been warped by this process – becoming more sexist, less respectful of the women in their

²⁸ Federici, p. 48.

²⁹ Federici, p. 75.

³⁰ Mies, p. 109

³¹ Federici, p. 14.

community, more prone to dismiss, to degrade, to beat and to rape. We are not told of any significant resistance to this transformation by the men concerned. So while the abstract genderless worker may have suffered as a result of these attacks on women, the new male worker *was* served by the increasing subordination of women – which in no way lessens the fact that this was a historic human tragedy.

ACT THREE: Still Higher Levels of Violence

We cannot know what would have happened had the balance of forces remained at this level, for events conspired to once again push the ruling class to the brink. Just a few hundred years after the plague, the labour shortage that continued into the 16th century due to the widespread hostility to capitalist work was exacerbated by a new decrease in the population (probably due to the increase in poverty as the gains of the 14th and 15th centuries were undone).

This was the era of the capitalist counter-revolution, and yet the new capitalist class could not create the labour they needed like they could make cloth or steel. Both Mies and Federici agree on this point that two of the greatest crimes of that age were committed to find a way around this crisis: mandatory procreation for European women and the mass kidnapping and enslavement of Africans. In Mies' words: "The counterpart of the slave raids in Africa was the witch hunt in Europe. The two seem to be connected through the same dilemma with which the capitalist version of man-the-hunter is faced: however much he may try to reduce women to a mere condition of production, to nature to be appropriated and exploited, he cannot produce living human labour power without women."³²

While Federici does not deal with the effects of the slave trade on gender relations within Africa, and only touches upon the way in which ideas of male and female power developed amongst African slaves in the "New World," she does note that "capitalism may not even have taken off without Europe's 'annexation of America,' and the 'blood and sweat' that for two centuries flowed to Europe from the plantation."³³

What Federici does concentrate on is the war against women in Europe, the hammer of housewifization which "degraded maternity to the status of forced labor."³⁴

European men had been burning witches since the 15th century, but this had originally just been one part of the campaigns against the heretics. In the 16th century the persecution of witches went from the margins to being the center of this campaign, and the accusations changed from being primarily about religious beliefs to concentrating on

³² Mies, p. 69.

³³ Federici, p. 103.

³⁴ Federici, p. 92.

sexual perversion, infanticide and reproduction. By the 17th century as many as 100,000 women were killed, and just as many more had their lives ruined by the accusation³⁵.

Whereas Mies emphasized the economic role of the Witch-Hunt, the way in which the theft of women's property was part of primitive accumulation, Federici convincingly casts doubt on this, pointing out that the overwhelming majority of victims had no property or wealth to speak of. Rather, this was a politically motivated war against women: what had to be destroyed was "the *female personality* that had developed, especially among the peasantry, in the course of the struggle against feudal power, when women had been in the forefront of the heretical movements, often organizing in female associations, posing a growing challenge to male authority and the Church."³⁶

Federici does us the service of contextualizing this mass murder within a growing hostility to women. At the same time as "witches" were being publicly tortured and killed, governments across Europe were passing laws against contraception, abortion, adultery, and especially infanticide – all of which were punishable by death. Other changes registered at this time are also worth mentioning: prostitution was now criminalized in such a way as to harshly punish the woman but hardly touch the male customer, the word "gossip" (which had meant "female friend" previously) now took on disparaging meaning, and – like women in Iraq today – new levels of male hostility forced women indoors, for to be seen walking the streets without a male escort was to risk insult or attack³⁷.

If it is tempting to see the Witch-Hunt as just one detail in this rise in misogyny, especially since historians are now saying that the number of dead was so much smaller than previously thought, one should remember what these trials and executions were like. These were public events, which normally involved new and incredibly sadistic forms of sexual torture approaching vivisection³⁸. The way in which the "guilty" were executed was also harrowing – drowning, burning, etc. – and the entire village (including the woman's children) was often forced to attend. So the 100,000 witches who were burnt during the Great Hunt (if this number stands future scrutiny) would have had a very different psychological effect than 100,000 deaths on a battle field. The murder of each woman thus became powerful propaganda.

Nevertheless, all of these changes, and not just the Witch-Hunt, did come together as pieces of a larger puzzle; men with big ideas were making their dreams come true, finally

³⁵ Federici, p. 208. Previous estimates of the numbers of witches killed had run into the millions – German feminist Ingrid Strobl put it at "between 9 and 30 million" (in "Fear of the Shivers of Freedom") – but more recent research which seems to be accepted by feminists puts the figure much lower. See "Recent Developments in the Study of the Great European Witch-Hunt" by Jenny Gibbons at http://www.cog.org/witch_hunt.html

³⁶ Federici, p. 184.

³⁷ Federici, p. 99-100.

³⁸ According to Mies, "The torture chambers of the witch-hunters were the laboratories where the texture, the anatomy, the resistance of the human body – mainly the female body – was studied. One may say that modern medicine and the male hegemony over this vital field were established on the base of millions of crushed, maimed, torn, disfigured and finally burnt, female bodies." (p. 83)

summoning the necessary violence to snuff out centuries of rebellion and resistance to class rule. The draconian “pro-life” legislation; making money male by driving women out of the formal economy; the Witch-Hunt – all of this was supported by the leading intellectuals of the day. A modern process - “the secular courts conducted most of the trials, while in the areas where the Inquisition operated (Italy and Spain) the number of executions remained comparatively low”³⁹ – aimed at completely rooting out “a whole world of female practices, collective relations, and systems of knowledge that had been the foundation of women’s power in pre-capitalist Europe, and the condition for their resistance in the struggle against feudalism.”⁴⁰

Other Lands

In the final chapter of *Caliban and the Witch*, Federici makes her most ambitious claim, that the Witch-Hunt was not just a European phenomenon, but also stretched across the Americas as conquistadors and pilgrims sought to break indigenous women’s power here. Relying on research by Irene Silverblatt and Luciano Parinetto⁴¹, Federici argues that the colonization in the “New” World in many ways mirrored the proletarianization and housewifization that confronted men and women in Europe. Here too, women had the most to lose, often having enjoyed greater status and power here than their counterparts in Europe. Here too, the new colonial economy required a division be engineered between indigenous men and women. Finally, here too the hunting of witches served to “instill terror, destroy collective resistance, silence entire communities, and turn their members against each other.”⁴² So by hunting witches the colonists “targeted both the practitioners of the old religion and the instigators of anti-colonial revolt, while attempting to redefine ‘the spheres of activity in which indigenous women could participate.’”⁴³

It is here that Federici’s argument becomes less convincing. Silverblatt and Parinetto both seem to limit their studies to the colonization of modern-day Peru and Mexico by Spain – not a wide enough sample to draw any kind of solid conclusions about the experience of the victims of colonialism around the world. Research on colonialism in what is today Eastern Canada reveals that patriarchal divisions were indeed introduced into indigenous society by the fur trade and Christian missionaries, and that this did require the specific subjugation of indigenous women... but witch-hunting was not involved⁴⁴.

One assumes that a worldwide survey would find many other places where witch hunting either played a different role, or else where it has been absent altogether from the colonial experience. This is especially important, for in an off-hand way Federici implies that

³⁹ Federici, p. 168.

⁴⁰ Federici, p.102.

⁴¹ Irene Silverblatt’ *Moon, Sun and Witches* and Luciano Parinetto’s *Streghe e Potere*

⁴² Federici p. 220

⁴³ Federici p. 231. The quote is from Silverblatt, p. 174

⁴⁴ See Devens, Carol *Countering Colonization: Native American Women and Great Lakes Missions, 1630-1900* (University of California Press 1992).

witch-hunting in modern-day Africa and Brazil is essentially of a kind with the European Witch-Hunt, the result of neo-colonial exploitation – perhaps, but the point is in no way proven.

More problematic, Federici’s analysis of colonialism seems inconsistent and underdeveloped (the chapter is the shortest in the book, only 25 pages). One suspects that this may be related to her ambiguity regarding divisions within the working class. To give just one example of the poles between which she seems torn, at one point we are told that proletarian misery in Europe “only lessened to the degree that the super-exploitation of workers had been exported, through the institutionalization of slavery, at first, and later through the continuing expansion of colonial domination”⁴⁵ ... and yet later on we are told that “like the Conquest, the slave trade was an epochal misfortune for European workers”⁴⁶ because it strengthened the hand of the bourgeoisie.

The end result is that even the most obvious specificities of colonialism (beyond super-exploitation) are glossed over, giving the impression that indigenous peoples are different from the European proletariat only insofar as they may be more or less successful in resisting capitalist rule. Genocide itself is subsumed into the relationship between capital and labour, as when the annihilation of indigenous nations – which is described as a Holocaust – is explained as “work, disease and disciplinary punishments”⁴⁷ killing two thirds of the indigenous population. It is a painful fit to try and stuff the extermination of entire peoples into that box.

Noting this, one wonders about the virtual absence of Jews and Moslems from Federici’s account. It has been established that relations between Christendom and these groups were also thoroughly gendered. Pogroms, the crusades, legal codes which proscribed the death penalty for any Christian woman found guilty of miscegenation, the oversexualized Christian stereotypes about Jews, the use of rape in warfare... all of this is mentioned only in passing, if at all. Agreeing with Federici’s observation that primitive accumulation necessitates the accumulation of hierarchies within the proletariat, one is left wondering how the imposition of hierarchies of “race” played out in the European subcontinent.

Taking It From Here

Caliban and the Witch is a fascinating book. With broad strokes, it sketches a picture of the anti-capitalist struggle in Europe which is both informative and inspiring.

A careful reading not only reveals much about “primitive accumulation,” but exposes a structural link to violence against women. It is a book that helps lay the foundation for a movement that will be at the same time anti-colonialist, anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalist. It also brings much needed clarity to the question of the “mind-body split,” a

⁴⁵ Federici, p. 83.

⁴⁶ Federici, p. 105.

⁴⁷ Federici, pp. 65-66.

question which seems to have the potential to integrate the struggles of trans-people⁴⁸, the otherly abled, the anti-psych movement and others within an anti-capitalist framework.

In other words, this book should be read and debated by all people who struggle for human liberation.

That said, on the question of colonialism and divisions between different sections of the working class, Federici is at times inconsistent. While it in no way diminishes what is good about *Caliban and the Witch*, this book should not stand alone. As I have already noted, the larger story told here is not new, and without providing an exhaustive list I would strongly suggest people also check out Maria Mies' *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, Butch Lee's *The Military Strategy of Women and Children*, and the growing body of literature examining how capitalism either uses or introduces patriarchy to those societies it colonizes. J. Sakai's *Settlers: Mythology of the White Proletariat* (which does not deal with gender), and Butch Lee and Red Rover's *Night-Vision: Illuminating War and Class on the Neo-Colonial Terrain* (which does deal with gender) are also worth reading for the light they shine on the question of how classes are made and unmade, and the role of parasitism and opportunism (which capitalism tells us to call "ambition") in this process.

Despite some weaknesses, *Caliban and the Witch* promises to become a classic, and this is a good thing. By showing how men's struggles against women have been necessary for developing more advanced forms of exploitation, Federici provides us with the evidence necessary to draw our own conclusions about class and class collaboration. She also gives us a both terrifying and empowering vantage point from which to understand not only our history but also our future.

Throughout the world, countries devastated by neo-colonialism have experienced the growth of men's movements that aim at rolling back the gains women made during the anti-colonial revolutions (that they are doing this while trumpeting the anti-colonial rhetoric of thirty years ago should not fool us). Like the Witch-Hunt, we are told that this is due to cultural backwardness and surviving feudal traditions, and yet upon looking closer here too we see that what is going on seems without precedent, cut from new cloth, modern and capitalistic. This is the most important place to apply what Federici teaches (if at times despite herself): that the rise of ambitious male classes depends on the intense patriarchal subjugation of "their" women.

It is only by remembering this, by facing the hard truths of our present and our past, that we can move beyond following in the footsteps of this men's movement or that, and perhaps finally reconstitute a resistance movement that tolerates no hierarchy and accepts no exploitation, demanding at a minimum liberation for all.

⁴⁸ See for instance Pei-Mun Tsang, James and subRosa, *Yes Species* (SubRosa Books 2005) pp. 49-59. Available for download on the internet at http://www.refugia.net/yes/yes_06useless.pdf

This review can be viewed as an html document at
http://www.kersplebedeb.com/caliban/caliban_review.html