

## Book Review

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Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn, New York: Autonomedia, 2004), Rs. 1585, Pages 288, pbk, (ISBN 1570270597).

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To understand the socio-political significance of Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* (hereafter, *Caliban*), one must go back to the 'Wages for Housework' campaigns in the 1970's. The campaign was a transnational social movement which battled for a salary for housework, given its strategic importance to the capitalist economy through the reproduction of the next generation of workers and the care of the current generation with no direct cost to the State or the market.<sup>1</sup> In 1975, Federici produced a "revolutionary" pamphlet titled "Wages against Housework" challenging the pillars on which the patriarchy of wage rests which dealt with how women are socialized to become *good wives* who provide a "labour of love."<sup>2</sup> In 1984, she co-authored the book *The Great Caliban: History of the Rebel Body in the First Phase of Capitalism* with Leopoldina Fortunati which examined the reorganization of housework, family life, child raising, sexuality and male-female relations during sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. *Caliban* deals with similar ideas but differs in its scope as it focuses on a different period in history, that of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. In the Preface, Federici also connects her arguments to the contemporary changes she witnesses during her stay in Nigeria. As she writes:

In Nigeria I realized that the struggle against structural adjustment is part of a long struggle against land privatization and the "enclosure"

<sup>1</sup> Patrick Cuninghame, "Italian feminism, workerism and autonomy in the 1970s", *Amnis* 8, 2008. <http://journals.openedition.org/amnis/575>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/amnis.575>

<sup>2</sup> Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework*, (Bristol: Power of Women Collection and Falling Wall Press, 1975).

not only of communal lands but also of social relations that stretches back to the origin of capitalism in 16th-century Europe and America (p.9).

The title is a reference to the characters of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Situating *The Tempest*, Valdivieso writes that in all probability Shakespeare was influenced by papers of the Virginia Company describing a shipwreck off the Bermudas in 1609 and it is generally acknowledged that travel literature connected with the New World was one of the major influences on his plays.<sup>3</sup> Caliban, an anti-colonial *rebel* in seventeenth century Americas represents the proletarian body which becomes the sight of resistance to capitalism. The body undergoes radical ideological transformation brought about by Descartes and Hobbes, from a body viewed as a "receptacle of magical powers" (p.141) to a mechanical tool devoid of reason which produced "the human body...the first machine developed by capitalism" (p.146). The figure of the Witch, who in *The Tempest* is Caliban's mother, refers to the world of female subjects that capitalism had to exterminate – "the heretic, the healer, the disobedient wife, the woman who dared to live alone, the obeha woman who poisoned the master's food and inspired the slaves to revolt" (p.11).

Federici retells the history of "transition" from feudalism to capitalism from the viewpoint of women, the body and primitive accumulation, amalgamating these three ideas to provide a perspective that mainstream history has missed out. She reworks Marx's conception of primitive accumulation, and Foucault's analysis of the power techniques to which the body was subjected by situating women's reproductive labour as primitive accumulation, and highlighting the repressive character of power and the disciplinary techniques (witch-hunts) used by the ruling class to gain control over women's sexuality, leading to the gendered accumulation of their bodies as "unpaid laborers in the home" (p.95). Hence, from the standpoint of women, the "transition" to

<sup>3</sup> Sofía Muñoz Valdivieso, "'He hourly humanizes': Transformations and Appropriations of Shakespeare's Caliban", *Sederi* VII (1996): 269-272.

capitalism doesn't seem progressive or liberative as Marx claimed it to be.

Her account of an alternative history makes clear that the capitalist social and economic system did not directly evolve from feudalism but in fact was a "response of the feudal lords, the patrician merchants, the bishops and popes" (p.21) to the anti-feudal struggles, curbing the possibilities of an egalitarian social order. The period of transition from the lens of the anti-feudal struggles lays bare the socio-political agenda behind the English enclosures, conquest of Americas and the control over the reproductive power of women, especially through the witch hunts and the discourse of demonology.

Following the experience of Black Death, the ruling class was threatened by a loss of power. As the European peasantry and the urban proletariat gained strength due to the scarcity of labour. This unprecedented power increased their self value as too many employers were competing for their services (p. 46). To invert this, political authorities turned class antagonism into antagonism against proletarian women, by legislating dissensions amongst the united proletariat to decriminalize rape and institutionalize prostitution (p.47). This was the first step to attack women's sexual freedom. Federici provides an extended version of the strategy used by the ruling class to tackle "deaccumulation" arguing that expropriation and enslavement were not the only means through which the working class was formed and "accumulated". It required the transformation of the body into a work-machine and also the suppression of women to the reproduction of the work-force (p. 63). The latter could only be done by normalizing the reproductive function women were to play in society, by instilling terror in the psyche of other women through the spectacle of the extermination of witches.

But who really were the witches? The witches were the first practitioners of birth control and abortion (p.206), they were the midwives and "wise women" who were the traditional depository

of women's reproductive knowledge and control (pp. 182-183); witches were mostly old, widowed women or those who lived alone (p.171), negatively affected by land privatization as their families moved to the cities—leaving them to beg in the villages or rely on public assistance; witches were the women who were too independent and did not obey their husbands (p.111).

The witch-hunt was also the first persecution in Europe that made use of a multimedia propaganda to generate a mass psychosis among the population. Alerting the public to the dangers posed by the witches, through pamphlets publicizing the most famous trials and the details of their atrocious deeds, was one of the first tasks of the printing press.

It was a turning point in women's lives and their collective psyche which succeeded in dividing the proletariat and in constructing a new notion of femininity opposed to the demonic women—the witch. A new model of femininity was produced which overlooked the whole world of female practises, collective relations and systems of knowledge that had formed the basis of women's power in pre-capitalist Europe and were essential in them being a part of the peasant revolts and heretic movement against feudalism. This new model was that of an ideal woman defined her relationship to a man—mothers, wives, daughters, widows (p.97)—stripped off her identity as a worker. To be a perfect woman/wife she had to have the qualities of being chaste, passive, obedient, thrifty, of few words, always busy at work, moral and irrational (p.103). An ideological redefinition of the virtues and vices of women was propagated through literature and theatre—masculinity and femininity were constructed as polar opposites and women were portrayed to be inherently inferior to men (p. 100). This process of social engineering strengthened man's control over women's sexuality and reproductive powers.

Peter Linebaugh in his review titled "Torture and Neo liberalism with Sycorax in Iraq" has linked the witch-hunts to the torturing of prisoners in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay prisons asking the pertinent question "Why does torture accompany economic

development or primitive accumulation?" He highlights that the unspoken assumption is that the prisoners are not human beings, just the way the witches were demonized in the first phase of capitalism. He writes:

..it is part of a policy to terrorize and to create a new type of human being. It is inherent in both the project of expropriation and the process of exploitation. From the marsh Arabs and the desert tribes: modern labor power is created by war, religion, and torture. Migration, diaspora, criminalization, pauperization result.<sup>4</sup>

Federici's alternative narrative is an endeavour to the link the enclosure of land to the enclosure of women to the houses; to establish a connection between what the factory is to a man and what the body is to a woman; to provide an alternative understanding of alienation from workplace because it is not recognized as one; to show what socialization can do to human beings- setting them apart from realizing their essence; to question the legitimized torture programmes that accompany the expansion of capital; to make us question our normalized behaviour which is a result of activities that happened centuries ago.

Federici also provides a theoretical paradigm by putting Foucault's theory on "accumulation" into Marx's theory of "primitive accumulation". Three conceptual frameworks of Feminism, Foucauldian and Marxian amalgamated gives "all the world a big (needs) jolt"<sup>5</sup> in their mainstream understanding of the "transition" of feudalism to capitalism.

Corollary to this is Federici's concern about Marx's claim that capitalism was progressive and liberative for the worker, which

<sup>4</sup> Peter Linebaugh, "Torture and Neo Liberalism with Sycorax in Iraq", Counter Punch, 2004.

<http://www.counterpunch.org/2004/11/27/torture-and-neo-liberalism-with-sycorax-in-iraq/>

<sup>5</sup> Federici titles her second chapter as "All the World Needs a Jolt" referring to Thomas Muntzer's quote "All the world must suffer a big jolt. There will be such a game that the ungodly will be thrown off their seats, and the downtrodden will rise". (p. 21).

if viewed from the perspective of taming women's' bodies would seem contradictory. In the article "The Reproduction of Labour Power in the Global Economy and the Unfinished Feminist Revolution" (2011), Federici states that Marx's analysis of capitalism is incomplete as he fails to envisage value-producing work other than that of commodity production in factories. His ignorance of women's unpaid reproductive work in the process of capitalist accumulation is a sign of "blind spot in patriarchal social theory". She adds:

Had Marx recognized that capitalism must rely on both an immense amount of unpaid domestic labor for the reproduction of the workforce, and the devaluation of these reproductive activities in order to cut the cost of labor power, he may have been less inclined to consider capitalist development as inevitable and progressive.<sup>6</sup>

(Federici, 2011)

<sup>6</sup> S. Federici, "The reproduction of labour-power in the Global Economy and the Unfinished Feminist Revolution", 2010. Retrieved October 22, 2016, from <https://caringlabor.wordpress.com/2010/10/25/silvia-federici-the-reproduction-of-labour-power-in-the-global-economy-marxist-theory-and-the-unfinished-feminist-revolution/>