

OVERVIEW OF CALIBAN & THE WITCH

Sources: Book review by Peter Linebaugh published in the journal *Upping the Anti*; Maries Mies, excerpts from *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*; Notes by Catalyst Project

The birth of capitalism:

- a. control over land- privatization, enclosing the commons
- b. dividing workers' resistance by gender as class war tool
- c. destroying women's autonomy over their bodies
- d. accumulation of wealth based on women's unpaid/reproductive labor
- e. then expansion into colonies (primarily the Americas and Africa) using same ideologies and strategies

A broad overview of her argument:

Federici argues against Marx that primitive accumulation is not a necessary precursor for capitalism, but rather that primitive accumulation is a fundamental characteristic of capitalism itself. That capitalism, in order to perpetuate itself, requires a continuous transfusion of capital expropriation.

She connects this expropriation to women's unpaid labor and reproductive labor-- as a historical precondition to the rise of a capitalist economy predicated upon wage labor.

The historical fight for the commons and the struggle for communalism: Instead of seeing capitalism as being a liberatory defeat of feudalism, Federici interprets the rise of capitalism as a reactionary move to subvert the rising tide of communalism and to retain the basic social contract. Capitalism was a strategy devised in reaction to a time of unprecedented workers' power and mass uprisings against the elite.

She places the institutionalization of rape and prostitution, as well as the heretic and witch-hunt, trials, burnings and torture at the center of a methodical subjugation of women and appropriation of their labor. Capital punishment for contraception and abortion were introduced, during a time period where the Black Death had decimated the workforce and there was a desperate need to build the working population back up.

She then ties this into colonial expropriation and provides a framework for understanding the work of the IMF, World Bank and other proxy institutions as engaging in a renewed cycle of primitive accumulation, by which everything is privatized -- a new round of enclosures.

Edited excerpts from Peter Linebaugh's review in *Upping the Anti* #2 (*places emphasized in bold, and extra sentences in italics added by Catalyst Project*)

During the 16th and 17th century, hundreds of thousands of women were burned as witches across Europe. Witch trials didn't start until mid 15th c, in an era of revolts, population decrease from plagues, and coming crisis in feudalism. anti-feudal struggle is first evidence in European history of a grassroots women's movement (*for egalitarianism as well as versus the masters*)

Mass struggle by workers and peasants in the late Middle Ages: Workers and peasants, often organized in widespread heretical networks such as the Cathars — networks Federici terms, "the real First International", fought for freedom from Feudal obligations, against Church power and for the communal ownership of land and resources — seeking not only to abolish the old Feudal system, but to prevent the new capitalist one from coming into being. In doing so, workers, **often led by women**, gained control of several cities in the late 14th century, establishing the first workers' democracies, centuries before the Paris Commune or the Russian Revolution. In the 16th century Germany and parts of what is today the Czech Republic saw gigantic uprisings of virtually the whole working populations. Most of these revolts were drowned in blood, while others were outmaneuvered by a new strategy of the ruling classes to prevent their own overthrow: capitalism.

The ruling elites of Europe, under siege, needed to accomplish several goals: to find a **substitute workforce** for the rebellious workers, urban and rural in Europe; to **privatize land** and expropriate from it the village populations who were the basis of the heretical and other revolts; and to **alter the way humans thought about and used their bodies** so as to enforce a new kind of regular work-discipline without which capitalism would be impossible. *Protestants rise to power and criminalize begging.*

The first of these goals was accomplished through the **conquest of the Americas and the enslavement of Africans and of indigenous peoples** of the New World — the rise of a plantation economy and with it of a world market for capitalism's commodities — silver, gold, sugar, tobacco, later cotton. The second was accomplished by what is known to history as **the Enclosures** movement: in medieval Europe, much land was owned communally and managed democratically by assemblies of peasants in the villages (legislative acts privatizing communal lands (the commons) to be the property of the local lords). *This constituted Marx's idea of basis of primitive accumulation (ignoring colonialism, slavery and patriarchy).*

For to abolish the commons, a protracted process that was not complete in Europe in the 20th century, it was necessary **to divide the unity** of men and women, villagers and urban artisans that had produced the crisis of the ruling classes in the first place. The Witch Trials, and the nightmarish burning of hundreds of thousands of women as witches in towns across Europe for two centuries accomplished this: first by **breaking the power of women** who were often leaders collectively and individually of the

revolutions; second by forcing men to decide whether to risk their lives to save the women from the stake; third by enabling capitalism to impose on women reproductive work: that is to turn women's bodies into a machines for producing laborers, and taking away their control over reproduction itself (many "witches" were midwives); finally, those most in need of the commons, and therefore most willing to fight to defend it, as a place to graze animals, grow herbs or garden, collect firewood, berries or other foods, or to build a house on, were likely to be elderly women or single mothers, those most vulnerable and in need of the social security system provided by the common lands. The origins of the stereotypes of witches stem from these struggles.

The suppression of women was the *central part of a process of redefining the human body* itself from a sacred repository for the soul, or an animal body capable of pleasure to a work-machine available for capitalism. Philosophers like Descartes and Hobbes provided ideology. Witch burnings, institutionalized rape of poor women, etc provided practice.

(From a different Linebaugh article, making connections between Federici's historical analysis and Abu Ghraib: Nothing can so clearly help us understand the torture and the project of neo-liberalism as this, for Federici describes a foundational process creating the structural conditions for the existence of capitalism. This is the fundamental relationship of capitalist accumulation.)

The birth of the proletariat required war against women. This was the witch-hunt when tens of thousands of women in Europe were tortured and burnt at the stake, in massive state-sponsored terror against the European peasantry destroying communal relations and communal property. It was coeval with the enclosures of the land, the destruction of popular culture, the genocide in the New World, and the start of the African slave trade. The 16th century price inflation, the 17th century crisis, the centralized state, the transition to capitalism, the Age of Reason come to life, if the blood-curdling cries at the stake, the crackling of kindling as the faggots suddenly catch fire, the clanging of iron shackles of the imprisoned vagabonds, or the spine-shivering abstractions of the mechanical philosophies can indeed be called "life."

Federici explains why the age of plunder required the patriarchy of the wage. Gender became not only a biological condition or cultural reality but a determining specification of class relations. The devaluation of reproductive labor inevitably devalues its product, labor power, *so male workers also lost power*. The burning of the witches and the vivisection of the body enforced a new sexual pact, the conjuration of unpaid labor. It was essential to *Protestant* capitalist work-discipline. This is what Marx called the alienation of the body, what Max Weber called the reform of the body, what Norman O. Brown called the repression of the body, and what Foucault calls the

discipline of the body. Yet, these social theorists of deep modernization overlooked the witch-hunt!

Women Leadership in Social Movements Leading Up to the Birth of Capitalism

The women of medieval Europe played a major role in the heretical movements; the women of medieval Europe found gender integration in the cooperative labors of the commons that, indeed, depended on them. A true women's movement in the popular culture was happily described by Chaucer which often burst out in peasant revolt. This initiated the vicious period when the body was transformed from a repository of knowledge, wisdom, magic, and power to a work-machine requiring both terror and philosophy. The body under the terror of Rationalism is vivisected under a new sexual pact, the conjuration of unpaid labor. The maid, the prostitute, and the housewife became the exclusive labors of women, replacing the healer, the craftsperson, the heretic, the herbalist, the sage, the commoner, the old, the naturalist, the obeah woman, the single, the ill-reputed, the freely-spoken, the finder of lost property, the lusty or 'free woman,' the midwife.

Just as enclosures expropriated the peasantry from the communal land, so the witch-hunt expropriated women from their bodies, which were thus 'liberated' from any impediment preventing them to function as machines for the production of labor.

Some ideas from MARIA MIES (for more, see her Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale), summary by Catalyst Project

“Capitalism has always been about dividing up the economy into visible/“real” and invisible sectors, and invisible has always been the foundation for the economy. she looks at the “internal and external colonies” of capital: housewives in industrialized countries and third world colonies. Women’s unwaged work and reproductive work, and other unwaged work as the basis for capital’s continued functioning. As Mariarosa Dalla Costa says, women’s unwaged work is the precondition for men’s waged work, for them having the ability to sell their productive labor. “

(The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community, 1972, an early challenge to orthodox Marxism)

“Domestication” of women (“housewifization”) = women are controlled by men, and their labor becomes a “natural resource” an economic and cultural category

We can look at sexual division of labor as a capitalist tool for accumulating wealth and preserving power, and this helps see links between the processes of colonization and “housewifization”

Mies draws parallels between the "humanization" of men/workers/colonizers, and "naturalization" of women/unpaid nonworkers/colonized peoples.

These broad analogies have multiple levels. For example, Mies also looks at contemporary processes where enslaved Caribbean women were treated as a productive labor force, more valuable on the plantation than pregnant, at the same time period that bourgeoisie European women were being channeled into domestic and reproductive work.

Mies builds off Dalla Costa's work by looking at *structural similarities* between struggles by those "outside" capitalism/ on the peripheries:

women in industrialized countries,

Third World nations

Black youth in the U.S.

housewives in nuclear patriarchal families as internal colonies dominated by the state

Patriarchy helps uphold these structures of domination in multiple ways. Non-ruling class men's allegiance bought off by having their own little colony and by money coming in from external colonies, so they ally with the ruling elite of their nation, against women in their economic position, and against the working class in colonized nations. So patriarchy creates both an internal model within imperialist/settler communities, and also riding on the backs of colonized peoples.