

Reflection on Caliban and the Witch:

In this rich excerpt of *Caliban and the Witch*, Silvia Federici offers insight into the transition to capitalism in Medieval Europe and the ways that patriarchy became cemented into the new economic system. She frames the transition to capitalism as a counter-revolutionary shift instituted as a means of quelling popular revolts that were building against feudalism. Federici argues that in order for capitalism to develop, women's power had to be crushed, as unpaid reproductive labor was a necessary prerequisite for the development of a wage system. She discusses the ways that sexual violence, culminating in the Witch hunts, were conscious policy instituted as a means of forcing women into unpaid reproductive labor and weeding out rebellious and unruly women who were not conforming to the new confines of life under capitalism. She also describes the transition to capitalism in some detail, focusing particularly on the enclosure of the commons that took place during the early 16th century.

By the end of the 15th century peasant uprisings, often with women playing central leadership roles, were becoming increasingly common as people fought to undermine the power of the feudal Lords and build visions of society based on communal life. Federici writes, "The social struggles of the Middle Ages must be remembered because they wrote a new chapter into the history of liberation. At their best, they called for an egalitarian social order based upon the sharing of wealth and the refusal of hierarchies and authoritarian rule." Many of these radical currents were being pushed along by various heretical sects, who's challenge to the Christian ideology was echoed later as a justification for execution during the witch hunts.

One venue where revolutionary vision was manifested during this time were in the communally-held lands that were found all over feudal Europe. The commons were used for subsistence by many peasant farmers and were a refuge for the landless. People built homes, grazed animals and grew food on these lands. Federici also talked about the ways that the commons served as a safety net for elderly folks and single women, allowing a degree of autonomy that was lost with the enclosure of the commons. "As soon as land was privatized and monetary relations began to dominate economic life, [women] found it more difficult than men to support themselves, being increasingly confined to reproductive labor at the very time when this work was being completely devalued." Federici argues that this trend towards unpaid reproductive labor being defined as women's work was a development of early capitalism that has since become cemented into the capitalist culture.

Federici also discussed the role of sexual violence as a tool of instituting capitalism, essentially pointing towards the dawn of the capitalist era as the birth of a rape culture. She writes about the policies of decriminalizing rape of poor women as a tool for "undermining the class solidarity that has been achieved in the anti-feudal struggle." She also describes the ways that this cultural normalizing of violence against women laid the groundwork for the witch-hunts that began shortly thereafter. Federici talks a great deal about the institutionalization of prostitution in this period as a means of diffusing workers' protest. Brothels opened legally in every town, and prostitution became pretty much

condoned by the church. In this passage, I think Federici overlooks the ways that prostitution could have been a powerful source of livelihood for many of the women engaging in the work, offering a certain level of self-reliance and autonomy that was become increasing difficult for women to attain in the early days of capitalism.

It is in this context of unpaid reproductive labor being defined as women's work, and the legitimatizing of a rape culture, that Federici describes women as the new commons. "Women became for male workers the substitute for the land lost to enclosures, their most basic means of reproduction, and a communal good anyone could appropriate and use at will." The witch-hunts were a furthering of this movement towards a new patriarchal order, one where "women's bodies, their labor, their sexual and reproductive powers were placed under the control of the state and transformed into economic resources." Federici argues that the witch hunts were not about punishing any specific transgression, but rather about eliminating any forms of female behavior that challenged the new social order of capitalism.

This was an incredibly rich piece with way too much analysis for me to digest in one reading, or try to sum up here. I want to add a few notes of what it brought up for me. First of all, the enclosures of the commons is a trend that still lives on clearly today — in the structural adjustment policies of the IMF and the World Bank, as well as in the push towards the privatization of water, seeds, genomes, culture, the internet — all kinds of modern commons being faced with imminent enclosure. And wherever the ruling classes seeks to steal communally held resources, there is resistance — we needn't look far to find it. It's also profound to recognize that capitalism was not some kind of natural evolutionary step in human life as many would like to have us believe. Rather, it was a series of concrete policies instituted by the ruling class in an attempt to cling to power. Sometimes it is hard for me to remember to look beyond this economic system that has become ubiquitous in its colonization of so many aspects of our lives. But this culture of domination, expropriation, consumption, and theft is not an ancient invention, but a relatively new one. This makes me feel reassured that we can work to get beyond it.

It's also profound to connect to a history of white European radicalism that dates back five or six hundred years — to remember when I notice the magic of the world, or learn about plant medicine, or organize to create and ensure commonly held resources in my own community, I am connecting back to a revolutionary history that stretches back centuries and spans continents. I firmly believe that we will eventually uproot the seat of power that has for so long tried to strip us of our humanity through violence, divide us with racism, patriarchy and classism, and position itself as the only possible way of structuring the world. But the truth is that the logic of capitalism is a lie and if we can learn to draw lessons from the history of what's come before, and to analyze clearly where we find ourselves today, we can all play powerful roles in reshaping the world into one where power rests in the hands of the many, not in the pockets of a few.