

# Who Were the Witches?

## Patriarchal Terror & the Creation of Capitalism

Alex Knight

2013

a review of

*Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*, Silvia Federici, Autonomedia 2004, 288pp, \$14.95, [autonomedia.org/caliban](http://autonomedia.org/caliban)

Silvia Federici's book is an essential read for those of us seeking to overthrow systems of domination and to build a liberated future. What is most fascinating about *Caliban and the Witch* is how it challenges the widely-held belief that capitalism, though perhaps flawed in its current form, was at one time a "progressive" or necessary development.

Uncovering the forgotten history of the Witch Hunt that consumed Europe in suspicion and fire for more than 200 years, Federici demonstrates that capitalism has always relied on spectacular violence, particularly against women, people of color, workers, and those cultivating a more egalitarian life.

The book recalls the enormous and colorful peasant movements of the Middle Ages, which pointed towards non-capitalist futures for Europe, and by extension, the world. However, these paths were blocked. The "shock therapy" of the Witch Hunt was used to terrorize rebels and visionaries, impose new discipline on the body, on female sexuality in particular, and usher in a new social system based on a landless working class and the devaluation of women's labor.

Federici writes, "It is impossible to associate capitalism with any form of liberation or attribute the longevity of the system to its capacity to satisfy human needs. If capitalism has been able to reproduce itself it is only because of the web of inequalities that it has built into the body of the world proletariat, and because of its capacity to globalize exploitation. This process is still unfolding under our eyes, as it has for the last 500 years."

### **Capitalism—Born in Flames**

The main focus of *Caliban* is the Witch Hunt of the 15<sup>th</sup> through 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe, through which "hundreds of thousands of women were tried, tortured, burned alive or hanged, accused of having sold body and soul to the devil."

Federici argues that this repression was primarily "a war against women," which constructed a new sexual hierarchy based on the division between male wage labor and female unpaid reproductive labor such as raising children, caring for the elderly and sick, nurturing their husbands or partners, and maintaining the home. Those accused of witchcraft were often women who lived outside this binary—as rebels, healers, midwives, or those providing forbidden knowledge of contraception or abortion.

Federici posits this systematic violence against women as one mode in the formation of capitalism when she instructs that "the witch-hunt occurred simultaneously with the colonization and extermination of the populations of the New World, the English enclosures, and the beginning of the slave trade."

Contrary to "laissez-faire" orthodoxy which holds that capitalism functions best without state intervention, Federici expands upon Marx's proposition that it was precisely the state violence of this "primitive accumulation" that laid the foundation for capitalist economics.

Principally, capitalism could not have been formed without the creation of a landless working class. People do not readily submit themselves to wage labor unless they no longer have an autonomous ability to provide for themselves or their communities.

In Marx's oft-quoted section from *Capital*, "these new freedmen became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production...And the history of this, their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire."

But unlike Marx, who saw the separation of humans from their traditional land-bases as a necessary evil for the expansion of "the productive forces," Federici emphasizes the loss of the freedom we once enjoyed through connection to the land. She points out that before the Enclosures, even the lowliest of serfs had their own plot of Earth, which they could use for just about any purpose.

Federici writes, "With the use of land also came the use of the 'commons'—meadows, forests, lakes, wild pastures—that provided crucial resources for the peasant economy (wood for fuel, timber for building, fish ponds, grazing grounds for animals) and fostered community cohesion and cooperation."

Access to land acted as a base of autonomy—providing security for peasants who otherwise were largely subject to the whim of their "Lord." Not only could they grow their own food, or hunt in the relatively plentiful forests which were still standing in that era, but connection to the commons also gave peasants territory with which to organize resistance movements and alternative economies outside the control of their masters.

In the author's words, "As soon as they lost access to land, all workers were plunged into a dependence unknown in medieval times, as their landless condition gave employers the power to cut their pay and lengthen the working-day."

Capitalism has spread itself around the world since that time through the same methods of primitive accumulation. Once we are forced from the land, we have little choice but to submit to the discipline of the factory, office, or school.

### **A Forgotten Revolution**

Caliban is vital for challenging the Marxist theory of a deterministic march through historical stages, wherein capitalism is seen as a necessary development on the road to communism. Federici argues that other pathways existed then, just as the future is open now. "Capitalism was not the only possible response to the crisis of feudal power. Throughout Europe, vast communalistic social movements and rebellions against feudalism had offered the promise of a new egalitarian society built on social equality and cooperation."

The book's most inspiring chapters make visible an enormous continent-wide series of poor people's movements that nearly toppled Church and State at the end of the Middle Ages. These peasant movements of the 13<sup>th</sup> through 16<sup>th</sup> centuries were often labeled "heretical" for challenging the religious power of the Vatican, but from the anti-war, vegetarian Cathars of southern France to the communistic Taborites of Bohemia, they aimed for a much broader transformation of feudal society.

The heretics attained a mass following because they "denounced social hierarchies, private property and the accumulation of wealth, and disseminated among the people a new, revolutionary conception of society."

Most dramatically, in the 1420s and 30s, the Taborites fought to liberate all of Bohemia, beating back several Crusades of 100,000+ men organized by the Vatican. The uprisings became contagious all across Europe, so much so that in the crucial period of 1350 through 1500, unprecedented concessions were made including the doubling of wages, reduction in prices and rents, and a shorter working day.

Yet, the peasantry who had glimpsed the possibility of liberation would not be appeased by such reforms. Increasing numbers simply left the domains of the Lords to live as wanderers, while others refused to pay tribute or cooperate in the traditional ways. In Federici's words, "the feudal economy was doomed."

Elites responded by instituting the Holy Inquisition, a brutal campaign of state repression that included torturing and burning heretics to death. But as time went on, the target shifted from heretics to women as the Inquisition morphed into the Witch Hunt.

According to Federici, the Witch Hunt succeeded by driving a sexist wedge among workers and peasants that "undermined class solidarity." While women were faced with the threat of horrific torture and death if they did not conform to new submissive gender roles, men were in effect bribed with the promise of obedient wives and greater access to women's bodies.

As accusations of witchcraft swirled, suspicion and fear all but obliterated the solidarity of peasant communities. Not only were heretics and revolutionaries marginalized, but the new social divisions and distrust made it harder for commoners to resist the theft of their land by State-backed entrepreneurs in the Enclosures.

For European elites, in addition to stifling a working class revolution that had increasingly threatened their rule, the Witch Hunt laid the foundation for a new regime of labor exploitation and capital accumulation. Federici summarizes that “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 environment that has marked the advance of capitalist relations worldwide.”

Today, those of us who hold in our hearts the seeds of new worlds to come can look to the “heretics” and “witches” who resisted capitalism and state domination long before us. Their example should inspire us to carry forward a movement for liberation that is wide as the Earth and old as time.

Alex Knight is the editor of [endofcapitalism.com](http://endofcapitalism.com) and is writing the coincidentally named book, *The End of Capitalism*. In it, he argues that the global capitalist system is breaking down due to ecological and social limits to growth and we must now transition to a non-capitalist future.

Alex has been active in many social movements attempting to build new democratic pathways, the latest of which is a project called Strike Student Debt.

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