

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*
by Silvia Federici

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At the end of each chapter, there are short sections identifying issues and suggestions for further reading which “offer guidance to those more interested in scholarly texts.” As with the rest of the book, the authors sought to keep these sections brief. Despite the need for brevity, I believe that there should have been at least a mention of the “temporal-single-system interpretation” (TSSI) literature, especially in the chapter on “The Transformation Problem.” Discussion questions would have been helpful from an instructional standpoint at the end of each chapter, but were not included. There is an extensive nine-page list of references at the end of the book.

In the last chapter on “Marxism and the Twenty-First Century,” the focus shifts to a brief discussion of “‘non-economic’ issues” such as recent debates over class, the state and globalization, the environment under capitalism, and socialism. The authors respond to what they view as crude misrepresentations of Marx’s perspectives on these topics.

This book cannot serve as a substitute for reading the three volumes of *Capital*—as Fine himself recognized in the first edition. For the undergraduate student or enthusiastic worker, however, this slim volume is an excellent introduction to the subject .

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Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation, by Silvia Federici. Brooklyn, New York: Autonomedia, 2004. Paper, \$15.95. Pp. 285.

Silvia Federici tells a remarkable story — of the passage from the European Middle Ages to the capitalist present, with important links to the colonized (“third”) world — but it is told here from below. Unlike standard histories, even Marxist ones, which focus on the state, and on class conceived narrowly, *Caliban and the Witch* is alive with peasant protest and rebellion, women’s struggles for autonomy and dignity, revolts by enslaved indigenous peoples, and workers’ constant battle for daily survival. Successive chapters cover social movements in Medieval Europe; the construction of “difference” (the degradation of women) in the “transition to capitalism” (quotation marks are

the author's); the role of sex and regulation of the body; the witch-hunt that engulfed Europe in the late 16th and early 17th centuries; and the colonization and subjugation of the New World. The book is profusely illustrated with paintings, woodcuts and drawings from publications of each period studied.

The core chapter, the fourth, is on the witch-hunt. Federici shows that witch-hunting was widespread, from Scotland to Eastern Europe; that it was massive, with estimates of persecuted witches running into the hundreds of thousands; and that it was a systematic repression, striking deeply into all communities, affecting not just those who were accused and persecuted. Her moral outrage, at both the practice of the witch-hunt and the indifference of historians, is profound, as is her call to recuperate this historical moment: ". . . *the witch-hunt was the first unifying terrain in the politics of the new European nation-states, the first example, after the schism brought about by the Reformation, of a European unification*" (169, italics in original). The witch-hunt must be confronted, not just to correct the historical record but to understand the origin and nature of the capitalist era.

The same moral intensity informs *Caliban and the Witch* throughout, whether the topic is the revolt and repression of the Heretics and other early peasant movements, the subjugation of women and degradation of reproductive labor, or the genocide and enslavement of the populations of colonized countries. (Caliban, of course, is Shakespeare's native rebel in *The Tempest*.) In sum, this is a passionate, highly textured and detailed account of a wide sweep of history, from the standpoint of the great human majority — working, struggling to survive, and never relinquishing the human striving for dignity and freedom.

Federici also, of course, has an analytical interest. Her thesis is presented in the following extract quote (63–64):

1. The expropriation of European workers from their means of subsistence, and the enslavement of Native Americans and Africans to the mines and plantations of the "New World," were not the only means by which a world proletariat was formed and "accumulated."
2. The process required the transformation of the body into a work-machine, and the subjugation of women to the reproduction of the work force. Most of all, it required the destruction of the power of women, which, in Europe as in America, was achieved through the extermination of the "witches."
3. Primitive accumulation, then, was not simply an accumulation of exploitable workers and capital. It *was also an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class*, whereby hierarchies built upon gender, as well as "race" and age, became constitutive of class rule and the formation of the modern proletariat.

4. We cannot, therefore, identify capitalist accumulation with the liberation of the worker, female or male, as many Marxists (among others) have done, or see the advent of capitalism as a moment of historical progress. . . . capitalist accumulation continues to devastate life in every corner of the planet.

Points 1–3 make the subjugation of women central to capitalist accumulation. But this *second* “world-historic defeat of the female sex” (Engels) points precisely to the *specificity* of capitalism: *why* did capitalism, as opposed to precapitalist social orders, require “destruction of the power of women”? This gets to the heart of the matter, captured by point 4.

Federici is, quite simply, ambivalent about whether there is a “transition” to “capitalism” at all. (Indeed, she often places “transition” in quotation marks, as noted above.) One wants to ask: “accumulation” — of what? If the answer is “capital,” then the next question is: how does capital differ from feudal wealth? *Caliban* does not address this question, let alone suggest an answer. In its more narrative passages, history appears as one long struggle between the oppressed, with women forming a large contingent, on one side; and all manner of oppressors, from feudal lords to merchants, princes, clerics, colonizers, slavemasters and witch-hunters, on the other. If anything, the Middle Ages was a time of relative freedom, especially for women. The witch-hunts served the purpose of destroying women’s autonomous control over many useful social knowledges and practices, so these could be monopolized as sources of enrichment.

Federici sees that the Marxist mainstream has a different view, but she mis-characterizes that view. The Marxist tradition sees capitalism as a “liberation” of the worker only in a very restricted sense: it is the famous double freedom, from personal subjugation and bondage, but also from direct access to means of production. This is the instantiation of an even more powerful — because it is so hidden and deep-structural — means of exploitation. Capitalism *is* progressive and specific, in relation to feudalism, not because it constitutes some sort of liberation in itself, but because it creates social-material conditions pointing toward liberation. The point is not to argue this idea fully here; only to suggest that Federici does not adequately address it.

The irony is that Federici may have hold of a truly remarkable contribution to *theory* — but one that is in conflict with her tendency to succumb to a formless “we-vs.-they” narrative about human oppression, rather than sharing in the Marxist effort to grasp *both* revolutionary agency (history from below) *and* objective structures (the stadiality of progress). Why, after all, did women need to be persecuted? Why was the witch-hunt necessary? The *illusory* freedom of the seller of labor power rests on the spontaneous functioning of the working-class household. Capitalist exploitation, therefore,

required (does it still?) the hidden labor of the housewife supporting the “family wage.” This comes into being in advanced capitalist countries only in the 19th century, but its roots go back earlier. The sexual repression in the early modern era, so well documented by Federici, culminates in the witch-hunt as a component of primitive accumulation. This functioned not only to attack the autonomy that women had wrested from a *decaying* feudal order; it was also an element in the formation of the modern capitalist proletariat — the “free” *male* worker. If Federici were to accept the specificity and relative progressiveness of capitalism — and here is the irony — her interest in theorizing the “accumulation of gender difference” and the witch-hunt would bear even richer fruit.

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