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Review: Caliban and the Witch

Women, the body and primitive accumulation

Tobie

14 September 2006

Silvia Federici's "Caliban and the Witch; Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation" does a fantastic job of taking the feminist analysis of the body and re-conceptualizing it within a class struggle understanding of history. She fills in the blanks that a traditional left analysis has missed, including the concepts of difference, women, race and the body. This work is very important, allowing feminists and socialists alike to realize that identity and class struggle are not polar opposite theoretical understandings. Federici's background comes from Italian Autonomous Marxism, from her comrades in the Midnight Notes Collective on the US East Coast, and past influences including Maria Rosa Della Costa — author of "The power of Women and the Subversion of the Community" (1971) and Selma James author of "Sex, Race and Class" (1971). She was in the wages for housework movement that discussed how capital was dependent on domestic labour and developed the understanding that patriarchy worked alongside capitalism to enslave women. She also spent time in Nigeria working on issues

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of development and feminism which resulted in her writing many works on globalization, structural adjustment and the IMF. These experiences put her in a good position to have an insight on a society that was forced to move from communal living to that of capitalism. This book is her project to express an understanding of women's position in our society and the effects of globalisation and imperialism.

Feminists have always critiqued Marxist theory for not acknowledging the reproductive role of women and the importance of the body in production. Feminists have taken time to show how the body is a place of struggle and resistance. Federici continues to do this without disregarding class struggle as fundamental. Instead she gives an argument for how the body and female sexuality, reproduction and knowledge have been systematically targeted in order to break solidarity of working class struggle. She gives examples of its use in destroying the rebellious serfs: *"efforts were made by the political authorities to co-opt the youngest and most rebellious male workers, by means of a vicious sexual politics that gave them access to free sex, and turned class antagonism into an antagonism against proletarian women"* (pg. 47) As anarchists this is very important, realizing the feminism is not individualist but involved in complex power structures.

The book jumps back and forth in both time and place so the reader should either have good knowledge of feudalism or get ready to be a bit confused. It goes from looking at the serfs' struggle for land and the heretical use of religion to challenge hierarchies and power, then moves onto the colonization of the Americas and demonisation of aboriginal cultures. The main argument focuses on the witch trials as the central example of how women's bodies were targeted in a counter-revolutionary strategy to facilitate primitive accumulation, i.e. the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production.

The period which saw the transformation from feudalism to capitalism involved what Marx termed primitive accumulation. In Europe this saw the working population (serfs) of Europe being deprived of the 'means of production' e.g. land. Primitive accumulation also involved the enslavement of some of the population of Africa and the America's and the use of this enslaved labour to extract gold and silver from the new world. All together this primitive accumulation created both the capital and dispossessed workforce on which capitalism was built.

One of Federici's main arguments is that the transformation to capitalism of primitive accumulation was not just the economic relationship to labour and production but also includes reproduction and the alienation from the body through science and wage work.

In Federici's overview of the serfs' struggle and the heretical movement in the first part of her book, she says that it was their struggle and the failure of feudalism that brought along capitalism. She included the importance of women's role during this time, where women were less dependent on men economically and socially and where they treated on more equal basis. This is not to say that there was any form of feminist utopia. Saying both that this was the first women's movement in several European countries as well as the first proletariat international.

Unlike the American witch trials the European ones included both men and women. Silvia concentrates on the prevalence of women being targeted. She importantly genders and classed the witch trials by looking at who was being prosecuted and why. The witch trials were an exemplary performance used to discipline other unruly subjects through example. It is interesting to note that neither men nor women stood up to stop or challenge the witch trails and subsequent burnings.

She places the witch trials into a historical context to understand why women were being prosecuted. Two things happened in this time. First of all, the banned certain ways of

life and secondly science and intellectualism provided a way of understanding the world that legitimised this change. It was a change of culture from a time of living on commons and communal living to a time of capitalism and the individual. Those affected most by this change were elderly women who no longer were taken care of through the “moral economy” and had to steal from private land to survive. It was these women who were being persecuted as witches. Secondly there was the introduction of science, the redefinition of the body and the interest in anatomy which changed the body to a machine that can be modelled into a worker.

Women’s knowledge was destroyed by the transition into capitalism. Women’s knowledge whether it was midwifery or medicine was demonized since it didn’t work within the confines of science and intellectualism. This intimate knowledge of the body was passed on over generations through oral tradition. So the process of alienation from production occurred alongside an alienation from reproduction. The witch trials were a hunt to erase any form of control over the women’s body such as knowledge of birth control, abortion, midwives and medicine women. She argues that the witch trails in Europe and the Americas have a very similar root; anyone who was using other forms of knowledge and understanding that challenged the capitalist, imperialist goal was targeted either as a witch or a savage.

This understanding of women’s work gives insight to the root of what is called the feminization of poverty. This is the fact that the majority of the world’s poor are women. According to the UN, even today women earn about half of what men earn.

The book itself, although full of insightful and captivating ideas, is plagued with an academic language and style. Those interested in engaging with her work will find her examples and theoretical analysis very interesting. For those who would rather learn in other ways, I encourage you to listen to her talk

on the book at Fusion Arts in New York City on November 30, 2004 which is hosted on Interactivist Exchange. She gives a detailed overview of her thesis and the reasons she finds her work important now.