

# **From the Great Witch Hunt to the Epoch of Capitalist Decay**

**Review of Silvia Federici's Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and  
Primitive Accumulation**

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Feminist historians, as well as specialists in religious and medieval history, have studied the persecution of “witches” in Europe and North and South America. This was concentrated in the 16th and 17th centuries, and somewhat before and after. Led by the church, but including state authorities, a hue and cry was raised against women who were accused of following a heretical sect, composed almost only of women, which supposedly worshipped the devil. Special tribunals were set up, methods of torture were standardized, and witch hunting manuals were published.

The numbers of women so persecuted is unknown. Some estimates run into the millions, but the best estimate is that, over three centuries, about 200 thousand were accused of witchcraft, of whom 100 thousand were killed (Federici, 2004). It is impossible to know how many of these people were just women whom someone disliked, how many were midwives or herbalists, how many were practitioners of pre-Christian religions, and how many were genuine worshippers of the devil. If any were.

## Primitive Accumulation

What is exceptional about Federici’s book is that she ties up the witch hunt with Marx’s concept of “primitive accumulation of capital” (raised in Part VIII of *Capital*, vol. 1; Marx, 1906). Unlike Adam Smith, Marx did not think that capitalism gradually grew by small businesspeople slowly accumulating small amounts of wealth, until they had enough to hire workers, and then eventually getting rich enough to displace the feudal aristocracy.

Instead, Marx thought that there had been a “*pre-historic stage of capitalism*,” one which “*clears the way for the capitalist system*” (p. 786). By violence, using non-economic institutions such as the state, wealth was amassed by a few for use as capital. A landless, propertyless, class of workers was created by throwing peasants and urban artisans off their land and out of their homes, while dividing up communal property. The people were forced into becoming “*a ‘free’ and outlawed proletariat*” (Marx, 1906; p. 805). The commons were enclosed (privatized). European serfs were dispossessed. Native American peoples were driven from their lands. Africans were captured and enslaved. And so the capital/labor relationship was established.

“*The spoliation of the church’s property, the fraudulent...robbery of the common lands, the usurpation of feudal and state property under circumstances of reckless terrorism, were just so many idyllic methods of primitive accumulation.... The extirpation, enslavement, and entombment in mines of the [American] aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalized the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production ....*” (Marx, 1906; pp. 805, 823).

This overlaps with an anarchist analysis. Marx is far from holding that it is economic production alone which creates all other forces in society. While capitalism may be said to have created the modern state, the state may also be said to have created capitalism. “*They all employ the power of the state, the concentrated and organized force of society, to hasten, hothouse fashion, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode.... Force is...itself an economic power*” (Marx, 1906; pp. 823–824).

The great anarchist Peter Kropotkin, writes of the same period, “*The role of the nascent state in the 16th and 17th centuries in relation to the urban centers was to destroy the independence of the cities; to pillage the rich guilds of merchants and artisans; to concentrate in its hands the...administration of the guilds .... The same tactic was applied to the villages and the peas-*

*ants...The state...set about destroying the village commune, ruining the peasants in its clutches and plundering the common lands”* (Kropotkin, 1987; p. 41). If not precisely the same as Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation, it describes the same process.

## **Primitive Accumulation and the Degradation of Women**

Marx did not discuss how primitive accumulation affected women, nor did Kropotkin discuss how the rise of the modern state specifically affected women. This is the great contribution of Federici and a few others.

The witch hunt was an attack on half the population, mostly focused on poor women in the cities and countryside. The campaign against supposed witches was part of general misogynist sentiments promoted by the church and state. It whipped up hysteria and misdirected people’s fears and angers from the rich to other poor people (similar to the rise in anti-Semitism of the time). It divided working people, causing men to cling to male privileges even while their general conditions were being undermined. It drove women out of the traditional workforce. It prepared women to become modern “housewives” –part of the working class which is not directly paid wages but who work to create and recreate the labor power commodity of their husbands and children. (Of a lesser, but real importance, working class women were also turned into part of the “reserve army of labor,” to be hired as waged workers when needed, but to be last hired, first fired, and superexploited always.)

I am just touching on some of the insights developed in the book on the way the great witch hunt was part of the primitive accumulation of capital of the 16th and 17th centuries. As Federici states, this concept was not hers alone. Among others who raised this connection, she mentions (as “now a classic work”; p. 13) Maria Mies (1986), *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*. Mies concluded that the capitalist process of workers’ exploitation could not function without the exploitation of women by men—and that both are essential to the despoliation of nature by humanity and the oppression of colonized countries by the central powers. There is only one system, which she calls “capitalist-patriarchy.”

## **The Return of Primitive Accumulation in the Epoch of Capitalist Decay**

Unfortunately, there are certain weaknesses in Federici’s analysis. For one thing, she regards capitalism as simply—nothing but—a counter-revolution, totally reactionary, in response to the crisis of feudalism. Marx believed that capitalism was progressive, compared to feudalism, and that its increased productivity lays the basis for socialist freedom; industrial capitalism, he argued, had created the modern proletariat, which was capable of creating a cooperative democracy. Federici believes that capitalism could have been avoided altogether, although she does not say how. Her only argument for this opinion is that there were many uprisings by peasants and artisans against the feudal lords and emerging bourgeoisie, raising democratic and communalist programs. This is true, and it speaks to humanity’s perpetual desire for freedom. But, by the same token, all these rebellions were defeated.

Of course, this is not a thesis which can be proven either way, short of an alternate universe (I am not questioning whether successful rebellions might have created a more democratic capi-

talism, but whether history could have jumped directly from feudalism to socialism). Personally, I hope that Federici is wrong. If she is right, then humanity has been failing to win socialist freedom for at least 500 years, despite an objective ability to do so. This does not speak well of our chances in the coming decades. But if she is wrong, then perhaps humanity only failed to achieve a possible freedom for about 100 years, which is not so much as history goes.

More significantly, she does not understand Marx's concept of epochs of capitalist development. To Marx, once the preconditions for capitalism had been created by primitive accumulation, the trend was increasingly toward a more stable, free, and market-driven, capitalist economy. The pre-history of primitive accumulation had created vast slave-holding societies in the Americas. The 18th and 19th centuries saw slavery mostly abolished. This is not a matter of sharp differentiation of epochs but of trends and tendencies. After all, African-American ex-slaves continued to be superexploited. Aspects of primitive accumulation still existed, but they were no longer the main forces.

However, productivity increased until it clashed with the limitations of capital. With the growth of monopolies and semi-monopolies and of socialist working classes, a new epoch developed—the epoch of capitalist decay. The marketplace is interfered with by the semi-monopoly corporations. The state is more and more called upon to balance and protect the system. There is a new upswing of worldwide imperialism, from grabbing land and raw materials, to foreign investments, and to “unequal exchange” between the industrialized countries and the poorer peoples, and the looting of the environment.

In his *Grundrisse*, Marx summarized the epochs: “*As long as capital is weak, it still itself relies on the crutches of past modes of production....As soon as it feels strong, it throws away the crutches, and moves in accordance with its own laws. As soon as it begins to sense itself as a barrier to development, it seeks refuge in forms which, by restricting free competition, seem to make the rule of capital more perfect, but are at the same time the heralds of its dissolution and of the dissolution of the mode of production resting on it*” (quoted in Daum 1990; p. 79).

Federici writes, “*A return of the most violent aspects of primitive accumulation has accompanied every phase of capitalist globalization, including the present one..*” (p. 12). She illustrates this last point by her experiences in Nigeria in the 1980s. This is a valid statement. But the first such period was described as an epoch of imperialism by Luxemburg and by Lenin, and led to two world wars, great revolutions, and the rise of totalitarian regimes in Russia and Germany (with revivals of slave labor !). For various reasons, this was followed by the period (a subpart of an epoch) of the post-WWII boom (see Price, 2009). The break-up of that shallow, false, prosperity, is what she saw at first hand in Africa.

We are now living in the reassertion of the epoch of capitalist decay and the revival of primitive accumulation. Technology has advanced to the point where toil and degradation could be ended for all. An international, collectivized, working class has been created with the potential to end world capitalism, in alliance with all oppressed groupings from women to exploited nations. But technology has also reached the point where humanity could be exterminated by nuclear wars or ecological catastrophes, or both.

## The Epoch and the Revolutionary Program

The nature of the epoch and the period we are living through determines the program we raise. If the current period is no worse than any other time in the history of capitalism, then there is no urgency about making a revolution. But if we are in a possibly final period of an epoch of capitalist decay, then a revolutionary program must be at the top of our agenda.

It is unclear, from this book at least, what is Federici's vision of a better world. She can be read as wanting a radically democratic and communal society. But she refers to totalitarian, state capitalist regimes as "*new socialist states in Europe and Asia*" (p. 18). Instead, Maria Mies concludes, "*The feminist movement is basically an anarchist movement...which wants to build up a nonhierarchical, non-centralized society where no elite lives on exploitation or dominance over others*" (1986,; p. 37). *We need a different way for people to live together. As Luxemburg said, the choice is "socialism or barbarism."*

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Explains connection between the Great Witch Hunt of the 16th and 17th centuries and Marx's concept of Primitive Accumulation of Capital. Relates these to Kropotkin's discussion of the rise of the state. And to the Marxist conception of the Epoch of Capitalist Decay (Imperialism).

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