

Essay

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# Book Review: *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*

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## Abstract

For those of us resolved to discern the complex relationship between capitalism and patriarchy, Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2021) certainly gives us a few answers, although the non-chronological, and occasionally convoluted, nature of her writing can make her work a difficult read. In this essay, I utilise the works of various Marxists, feminists, and sociologists to critically review Federici's (2021) work. To begin, I outline Federici's main arguments and reinterpretations of historical phenomena, before exploring the relevance of her work to contemporary life. I conclude by arguing that her work, though undoubtedly brilliant and thought-provoking, unfortunately has a handful of glaring flaws which are difficult to overlook.

**Keywords:** capitalism, patriarchy, witch, witch-hunt, feminism, Marxism, primitive accumulation, alienation, division of labour

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## Overview

In *Caliban and the Witch*, Federici focuses primarily on how the “war against women” (2021, p. 204)—the harrowing witch-hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—were vital to the emergence and expansion of capitalism. Far from being a foolish remnant of medieval superstition, as many historians contend (Federici, 2021, p. 174–175), the witch-hunts were, according to Federici, a violent tool that made possible the mass exploitation (or wage labour) that is apparent to this day. By guiding us through the ages, though not always in chronological order, from the

peasant revolts through to British colonisation, Federici manages to detect inconspicuous patterns, revealing the crucial role of women's subjugation in the transition to capitalism. Her work is certainly enlightening, drawing attention to a history that is often either ignored entirely or, when it is mentioned, treated as an insignificant outlier "irrelevant to the history of the class struggle" (2021, p. 175). Federici's analysis does what many great scholars hope to do: it drives us, as readers, to reconsider the way we fundamentally view and make sense of the world.

From the very start, Federici's analysis brings women to the forefront, highlighting how women's power "*had* to be destroyed for capitalism to develop" (2021, p. 14, my emphasis). According to Federici, women's initial collective resistance to the advent of capitalism (2021, p. 39) presented a major obstacle, intimidating the ruling classes. This led to a sinister collaboration between those with the most influence, such as the clergy, property owners, state officials, and scientists. These collective efforts (the witch-hunts) were crucial since they extinguished a significant threat to capitalism: women's resilience. As Federici puts it, "hundreds of thousands of women could not have been massacred and subjected to the cruellest tortures unless they posed a challenge to the power structure" (2021, p. 175). Distressing passages graphically describe just how women were degraded. Those accused of witchcraft (a conveniently vague crime) were "stripped naked and completely shaved ... then they were pricked with long needles all over their bodies" (Federici, 2021, p. 204). These were public spectacles "which all members of the community had to attend, including the children of the witches, especially their daughters who, in some cases, would be whipped in front of the stake on which they could see their mothers burning alive" (Federici, 2021, p. 204). It is impossible to comprehend the detrimental effect this had on women, their terror dissuading them from committing any acts that might be perceived as witchcraft. Merely reading these accounts is painful but also absolutely essential in comprehending that the witch-hunts were not a trivial anomaly. On the contrary, they were a *necessity* for those in power, serving to diminish the resistance of women. Crucially, this marked the shift away from the feudal period in which women, according to Federici, had far more autonomy (2021, p. 25).

### Hidden Knowledge?

Whilst reading, it was impossible not to wonder *why* I had previously known so little about the witch-hunts. Was it merely my own ignorance or has there been an intentional repression of

knowledge? We may draw upon Curato's (2013) work to find the answer. As Curato argues, many of the things we are taught need to be "situated in the broader context of the social construction of knowledge" (2013, p. 268). Put simply, knowledge is not born in a vacuum, and it is vital to question its social and political origins. If understanding the witch-hunts truly is "crucial to finding an alternative to capitalism" (Federici, 2021, p. xii), as Federici rather boldly claims, the political motivations behind concealing such knowledge become rather obvious. However, it is just as likely that such knowledge was not intentionally erased but rather, by prioritising the privileged views of "white, liberal bourgeoisie men" (Curato, 2013, p. 267), the voices of the oppressed were silenced, nonetheless. Either way, Federici's work, though not without flaws, is key if we wish to hear the voices of the marginalised.

### **Division of Labour and Alienation**

As Federici's argument regularly draws on "division of labour" and "alienation," I will now focus on dissecting these two concepts—both of which are intrinsically linked—to ensure an in-depth understanding of *Caliban and the Witch*. To begin, I will focus on division of labour.

Division of labour most often refers to the specialisation of tasks, the "reduction of the tasks of workers to one or two simple operations" (Hill, 2007, p. 342). Under capitalism, dividing workers and giving each a specific job to carry out markedly increases efficiency, resulting in higher production. Yet, as Durkheim (1984) points out, the division of labour is not only seen in the factory; instead, "we can observe its increasing influence in the most diverse sectors of society" (1984, p. 2). This is where Federici's book comes in handy: as she demonstrates, division of labour is just as evident in the family, with capitalism causing the roles between husband and wife to become increasingly differentiated or specialised. For Federici, the witch-hunts were key to the creation of this new division of labour—a sexual division. By "destroying a whole world of female practices, collective relations and systems of knowledge" (Federici, 2021, p. 117), the witch-hunts left women with very little, reducing them to mere reproductive organs and breeders for capitalism (Federici, 2021, p. 99). This caused a fundamental shift in perspective. For the first time, women were categorised as non-workers, their unpaid labour treated as nothing more than biological instinct. As Federici writes, "women experienced a process of legal infantilisation" (2021, p. 114), with marriage "now seen as a woman's true career" (2021, p. 105).

For Federici, reducing women to their physical anatomy—treating them as mere factories to “produce children for the state” (2021, p. 103)—marked the start of the extensive process of alienation from the body. Alienation can be understood as one’s estrangement from their human nature (Ollman, 1976). As Marx (2016) writes, it is far from natural that, due to capitalism, “the whole of human servitude is involved in the relation of the worker to production, and all relations of servitude are but modifications and consequences of this relation” (2016, p. 44). Put simply, capitalism ensures there is no separation of a worker from their work. The worker’s entire purpose becomes their production. In this case, women’s reproduction is their only value. They are estranged from their body, which is no more than an exploited commodity.

### Contemporary Relevance

I am sure I am not the only reader who, whilst scrutinising Federici’s work, felt that some of her points hit eerily close to home. If we look around us, can we honestly say that women are currently free from their role as producer of the workforce? If we consider recent legislation in the United States—take, for example, the overturning of *Roe v Wade*, which is the legislation that made access to abortions a constitutional right (BBC, 2022)—it appears that Federici’s arguments are relevant to contemporary life. Perhaps, denying access to reproductive care is proof of the state once again “aiming not just at intensifying [the body’s] subjection but at maximizing its social utility” (Foucault, 1976, cited in Federici, 2021, p. 148). In other words, has abortion been established as illegal because it does not serve the interests of capitalists? You could rightfully ask “why now?”—why has abortion only recently been made illegal, when women’s reproduction of the workforce has *always* served the needs of the bourgeoisie? If we are to believe Federici’s arguments that those in power have historically coaxed women “to have fewer or more children in any given span of time, depending on how much labour was needed” (2021, p. 131), it could be argued that now more than ever, due to the thousands upon thousands of lives lost due to COVID-19 (World Health Organisation, 2022), the state is motivated to create far stricter contraceptive laws in an attempt to restore the workforce. This is, of course, just a possibility, one of numerous explanations, although Federici’s work can certainly be used to support such arguments.

Federici’s work may also help to explain the ongoing discourse surrounding transgender rights in Britain. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has allegedly recently revealed plans to revise the 2010 Equality

Act, essentially removing trans people from the (limited) protection against discrimination that they are currently granted in the UK (Wakefield, 2022). If we consider Federici's analysis, this could be seen as a remnant of the Mechanical Philosophy, foundational to the rise of rationalism and capitalism. Mechanical Philosophy refers to viewing the body as a tool, a machine with the sole purpose of exploiting for maximum productivity. This is almost identical to the argument I outlined previously regarding women's role as mere reproducers, though I have kept it separate as Federici herself does not point out this correlation. This calculated exploitation of the body relies on "uniform and predictable forms of behavior" (Federici, 2021, p. 148). If people can choose—and I use this word loosely—their gender, does this take away from the predictability required from workers? For Marxists, this argument links directly to Marx's views that capitalism requires a "radical decharacterization": the "homogenization" of behaviour is vital for the bourgeoisie to anticipate workers' actions (Federici, 2021, p. 157).

Capitalism does not desire for our bodies to reflect our true selves because this is simply not conducive to our productivity. On the contrary, as previously mentioned, capitalism requires alienation from our physical selves.

### **Potential Critiques**

Understandably, you may be wondering: is this a stretch? Surely capitalism does not truly depend on our lack of self-expression. If we utilise Lugones' (2009) work, we find that the dominant belief that there are only two genders—men and women—was originally a Western invention which was transported globally by colonisers to erase "less-progressive" knowledge systems of the "other." Pre-colonisation, many cultures globally acknowledged variations of gender identities. For example, South Asian "Hijras," those who are male-bodied but feminine, historically had religious significance to Muslims and Hindus (Hossain, 2012). How does this relate to Federici and transgender policies? If we know that gender is not an inherited biological trait but a fundamentally political colonial construction, we must then ask who this construction benefits. Why would the West impose gender binaries, often through violence (Lugones, 2009), unless it was fundamental to the global rise of capitalism?

And so, through combining Lugones (2009) and Federici's (2021) analyses, we can now see how digressing from the gender binary poses a threat to capitalism.

This, however, brings me to my first criticism of Federici: her lack of consideration for non-Western gender binaries. This is especially evident when she discusses the persecution of various Indigenous Americans (2021, p. 249–251). As Lugones (2009) demonstrates, Native Americans did not conform to Western gender binaries and so, when making claims about Indigenous “women,” Federici is not depicting an accurate reflection of Native Americans' own experiences. Instead, it is a highly dismissive attempt at imposing a framework that is simply incompatible with those outside the Western gender binary. Ironically, Federici does what she accuses other sociologists of doing: prioritising the views of one type of person over the other; only in this case, rather than prioritising men's narratives over women's, her Eurocentric analysis prioritises white women's narratives over those of people of colour (POC).

Unfortunately, this is not the first nor the last time Federici unintentionally erases the voices of POC. By making sweeping generalisations, regularly comparing female African slaves to European proletarian “witches,” Federici removes the vital differences between their individual experiences. Similarly, Federici's claim that “it is no exaggeration to say that [European proletarian] women were treated with the same hostility and sense of estrangement accorded ‘Indian Savages’” (2021, p. 116) is downright offensive.

My main qualm with Federici is that she often draws definitive conclusions without sufficient evidence, particularly with her comparisons between “witches” and women of colour. This becomes increasingly obvious towards the end of her book. Additionally, she often mistakes correlation for causation. For example, Federici takes the laws passed in Maryland and Virginia in the 1660s, which segregated white and black people by making unions between them illegal, as proof that racism was imposed from the top, and so the White proletariat had no role in perpetuating racism (2021, p. 126). As Federici writes, “intimate relations between ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’ must have been very common, indeed, if ... [it] was deemed necessary to terminate them” (2021, p. 126). Using laws as a tool of analysis has many flaws, since there is no real way of knowing how such laws came to fruition. It was equally likely that the White proletariat pushed for this racist law.

Throughout the book, Federici interprets phenomena in a way that is overly generous to the White proletariat purely because it serves her argument. For example, early in the book, when Federici

writes about how “authorities practically decriminalised rape, provided women were of the lower class” (2021, p. 52), at no point is the male proletariat blamed for its role in carrying out these awful assaults, despite around 50% of these men raping women (Federici, 2021, p. 53). It is worth noting that this statistic is difficult to verify as Federici does not cite the source.

My final criticism of Federici is less significant. Unlike Federici, I don’t believe her arguments contradict Marx but rather build on his ideas by adding another dimension. Like Kliman (2016), I believe Federici misunderstands Marx’s work, assuming it to be an accurate, factual report rather than primarily theory. Like Federici, Marx certainly did not have all the answers, but both works should be used in conjunction to build our understanding and neither need to be disregarded.

## Conclusion

Overall, Federici does have some brilliant, well-researched passages which truly have the potential to be revolutionary. Her work will certainly impact the lens through which I analyse history. However, she is, unfortunately, let down by her lack of self-awareness and habit of cherry-picking information. Additionally, Federici’s analysis may have been stronger if she had acknowledged that some of her ideas weren’t entirely original (despite her insistence) but, instead, a continuation of other Marxist scholars.

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