

## THE BODY

### Reflections on “The Struggle for the Rebel Body”

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There is much more to Silvia Federici’s contribution than is included in her two-part *Capitalism Nature Socialism* article “The Great Caliban.” The simultaneously published book from which this essay is drawn, *Caliban and the Witch*, should be obligatory reading for anyone interested in ecosocialism and ecofeminism. The publication is also timely with respect to the Vatican’s latest attempt at minimizing Papal responsibility for the mass murder of “witches,” who, as Federici reminds us, were mostly peasant women. Leftist reactions to this Papal disavowal continue to elide the importance of witch hunts in the development of capitalism. So this book merits at least a brief description here to help contextualize my comment on her *CNS* article.

#### Gender as Constitutive of Class

Federici wrote *Caliban and the Witch* expressly “to revive among younger generations the memory of a long history of resistance that today is in danger of being erased. Saving this historical memory is crucial if we are to find an alternative to capitalism.” She seeks to accomplish this by showing how new sexual divisions of labor are central to the eventual mechanization of the proletarian body. As she argues, “If it is true that in capitalist society sexual identity became the carrier of specific work-functions, then gender should not be considered a purely cultural identity, but should be treated as a specification of class relations.” Assembling an abundance of historical evidence, she demonstrates how capitalist social relations are enabled by patriarchal re-arrangements. These involve the separation of production and reproduction, the use of wages to command the labor of unwaged workers, and the devaluation of women’s social status.

The creation and maintenance of these systemic gendered characteristics is achieved through plunder, which “has been a universal process in every phase of capitalist development.” This particular form of plunder involves:

- development of new sexual divisions of labor—reducing women’s production and reproduction activities to the reproduction of labor power;
- a new patriarchal order based on women’s exclusion from wage work and on their subordination to men;
- mechanization of the proletarian body; and
- transformation of most women’s bodies into machines for labor power reproduction.

This is made even more obvious in the following analogy: “...the body has been for women in capitalist society what the factory has been for male waged workers: the primary ground of their exploitation and resistance, as the female body has been appropriated by the state

and men and forced to function as a means for the reproduction and accumulation of labor.”

In other words, the change from feudalism to capitalism was rendered possible by reducing women to the status of resources for men (*divide et impera*), dispossessed of the means of subsistence. Federici alerts the reader to the existence of only one documented case in which men revolted against the witch hunt—a Basque fishing community. This testifies to the importance of learning from this history so as to develop more gendered strategies of resistance in the present. Moreover, it constitutes a condemnation of most past and current Left activism that obtusely refuses to consider patriarchal relations as a primary site of anti-capitalist struggle on a par with racism. But prevention of class solidarity is fundamental to the maintenance of a capitalist system. Capital accumulation could not have begun without the devaluation of women’s work, which thereby permitted the extension of unpaid work to extract a social surplus. The witch hunts, as acts of expropriation of women’s bodies, constituted violent strategies of domination by those in political power—mostly men—in order not only to safeguard their own interests during times of massive labor shortage, but to seek control over the labor power of the peasant majority.

The demonization and criminalization of women’s bodies was later transposed to the colonies and generalized to all “non-whites.” Thus, in parallel to the process of women’s subordination, another differential exclusion laid the foundation for incorporation of other peoples into the Eurocentric capitalist world-system. If control over labor power is crucial in capitalism, then control over the reproduction of labor power is even more fundamental for the endless accumulation of capital. Examining relations of reproduction is therefore paramount to a full understanding of capitalism and to developing effective ecosocialist politics.

### **Turning Ecosocialism on its Head?**

Using this depth of historical analysis and a critique of some forms of poststructuralism, Federici demonstrates the pivotal role that witch hunts played in the emergence of capitalism. Like many feminist scholars, she deconstructs the masculine bias and politically disempowering work of poststructuralists, notably Foucault, who ignored witch hunts altogether in his work. Here, Federici’s approach echoes that of Renate Holub, who critiques Foucault for failing to consider that there is a nested hierarchy to power relations. Some forms of power relations are more socially impacting or destructive than others to which they are nonetheless connected. Witch hunts are ineluctably part and constitutive of power relations that are of the greatest importance to the general formation of capitalist society. They were part of the struggle for control of workers’ bodies and a gendered disciplining of workers.

It is certainly no accident that “The Great Caliban” essay was included by *CNS* editors in the “history of nature” section. But the full implications of reading the struggle over the control of human bodies as “the first crisis of capitalism” is likely to be missed by many readers. Explaining the gender-based historical processes behind current ideologies of human bodies, Federici, perhaps unintentionally, illuminates the direct clash between the capitalist logic of mechanization and human bodies as natural processes. This is an aspect of

what Jim O'Connor defines as "the second contradiction of capitalism": the undermining of personal conditions, the body itself. However, Federici's ecofeminist thesis turns ecosocialism on its head by showing how the "second contradiction" antedates the "first contradiction" and its tension between forces and relations of production. This "first contradiction," a result of women's exclusion or subordination through the wage system, as Federici points out, has in any case mostly involved struggles among men; this has ironically facilitated cooptation and hindered class solidarity to the benefit of the bourgeoisie.

As ecofeminists have argued but have rarely been heeded, so Federici underlines the gendered character of the so-called "second [sic] contradiction." In other words, the materiality of people's bodies is of tremendous importance to a critical analysis of capitalism and to envisioning an alternative egalitarian society. Thus, ecosocialists should not only begin adopting a different terminology but an epistemological shift that posits "embodied" social relations as primary rather than consequent upon capital accumulation and recurring economic crises of the "First" Contradiction. This shift also has far-reaching reverberations in terms of political practice, and it should be a focus of enlightened ecosocialist discussion. For example, the issue of women's control over their own bodies concerns everyone directly, not just because people are born from a mother or because of the importance of putting egalitarian principles into practice, but because such struggles are by definition anti-capitalist struggles. "The Great Caliban" is one of many rich ecofeminist contributions that ecosocialists ignore at their political peril.

Notwithstanding my enthusiasm for Silvia Federici's recent contribution and the inspiration I draw from her writing, I find some shortcomings that could become springboards for further investigation. These relate to recent neo-Marxist critiques of capitalism, the ecological aspects of human bodies, the ontological status of bodies relative to labor power, and the place-specific dimensions of cultural constructs and other practices.

### **Laboring Bodies**

In terms of greater engagement with recent neo-Marxist work, Federici's study brings important correctives that should be further elaborated theoretically. The onus is now on neo-Marxists to integrate their theories with those proposed by feminist scholars. For instance, Moishe Postone surmises that technological developments in capitalism are inducing an increasingly sharp (and terminal?) contradiction between forces and relations of production, as human labor power is rendered increasingly redundant. His thesis develops a parallel with the earlier redundancy of animal labor along with the mechanization of production. Immanuel Wallerstein similarly argues for a global version of this contradiction as more people are proletarianized and become urban dwellers—a "de-ruralization" thesis. Yet the processes identified by Postone and Wallerstein are gendered, involving the potential retrenchment of patriarchal relations—witch hunts in another form, perhaps? With globalization, social differentiation strategies by gender and race are deployed to maintain divisions within the working class. As capitalist dictatorship through ownership of the means to survival becomes more obvious, critical engagement with insights from Postone and Wallerstein could possibly expand the theoretical reach of Federici's work.

With respect to the ecological aspects of human bodies, Federici's historical analysis might again be deepened. Though she explains how the constant attempt to shape human

bodies into machines alienates men and women from their bodies, she does not explore the biophysical ramifications of such alienation. It goes without saying of course, that neither do Marxists attend to this topic. This stands in contrast to the work of ecofeminist scholars, such as Carolyn Merchant, who connects the treatment of bodies as an assemblage of machines to changes in ecological relations in late feudal societies. She considers changes that brought about the destruction of the English fens, for instance, as part of the overall process of commodifying nature. Beyond this, Donna Haraway analyzes the emergence of material and ideational gendered constructions of human and nonhuman bodies as commodified techno-biological hybrids, or cyborgs. However, the ecological dynamics of bodies themselves are not really examined by either author. Humans, as part of nature, have differentiated bodies that require particular kinds of biological cycles, temperatures, nutritional intakes, *inter alia*, in order to survive, just as any other organism does. Perhaps ecofeminist studies by Rosalie Bertell and Vandana Shiva come closest to achieving this.

Capitalism is an attack on people's ability to function ecologically, as organisms, by disciplining the body to behave as if it were mechanical, thereby striving to homogenize human corporeality—a project that is ultimately impossible without destroying the species through genetic bottlenecks, as for instance, with genetic engineering. Mechanization also destroys some people's health more than others, a process that Federici mentions but does not elaborate. To understand capitalism's capacity to distort the human body and its function as an organism embedded in ecosystems, a more biophysically oriented analysis is warranted. We need to attend the gendered relationship between bodies and technologies and differential susceptibility to toxins according to gendered and raced bodies. Moreover, a more ecological perspective would study how the interaction of human bodies with nonhuman organisms—like intestinal flora and parasites or even wider physical processes—change with shifts in capitalist relations in different places. In the end, I feel a lack of attention to non-human agency limits Federici's grasp of how ecology fuses with concerns for social justice. This research agenda is already developed by many ecofeminists and can extend ecosocialist understandings of capitalism and point to new political alliances and struggles.

In terms of the ontological status of bodies relative to labor power, the connection between the body and labor power remains unclear in Federici's writing. This could be a source of politically unhelpful ambiguity, despite her careful attention to the body as site of political struggle. As I read her work, Federici does not address whether labor power is generally part of the body and at what point labor power becomes extraneous to the body. In other words, she does not clarify whether this is treated as feasible only in the fictitious commodity world of capitalism. In "The Great Caliban," the relation between labor power and the body is characterized through a container metaphor: "The body came to the foreground of social policies, because it appeared not only as a beast inert to the stimuli of work, but also as the container of labor power, a means of production, the primary work-machine." However, this description does not resolve the ambiguous relationship between labor power and the body that contains or contributes it. The container metaphor's implication of potential separation seems to foster an idea that one can indeed physically part ways with one's labor power. If this is not the case, then greater theoretical exposition might be warranted so as to examine the full ramifications of such an ontological premise.

## Local Specificities

Finally, Federici's great sensitivity to historical context is not transferred to the place-based aspect of constructions of the body. More work may be needed to make sense of the social and ecological context whereby the magical nature of "the body" was eventually supplanted by a philosophy of mechanism. The issue involves the geography of evolving cultural constructs. On an empirical level, the development of gender struggles and class relations in the Dutch context were hardly the same as in France or England during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In other words, these relations could be expected to reflect the more diffuse arrangement of power in the former country, with its greater commercial involvement on the part of farming landowners. The particular forms of violence inflicted on women's bodies through witch hunts must also have been accompanied by the place-specific development of a gender-differentiated construct of the body. Capitalist relations did not develop in the same manner in different places, as Federici is keenly aware with respect to the colonies, for instance. However, the occurrence of witch hunts in some regions and not others is left unexplained in *Caliban*. For instance, in Eastern Europe, witch hunts were small scale, which is problematic for Federici's argument that witch hunts correlate with capitalist plunder. It would seem that the conjunctural aspect in the development of practices for disciplining bodies involves much more than "primitive accumulation."

Federici's occasional lack of contextual specificity may explain the inconsistency of deeming the "second serfdom" in Eastern Europe as the result of a "population scarcity" that gave landlords an advantage. Meanwhile, a sharp demographic drop in Western Europe is interpreted as creating the conditions for greater peasant empowerment. Similar problems arise for Federici in terms of how constructs of the body changed and how "rebel bodies" were forcibly subjugated in regions such as France, where peasant majorities persisted until recently. In other words, in the discursive constructs analyzed, it is often unclear "whose body" is represented and the provenance of that body—whether incipient proletarian or peasant, male or female, relatively sedentary peasant or semi-nomadic Rom? More recognition of social contingency in the violent constitution of new bodies might help show why a particular capitalist ideology of the body became predominant.

Greater sensitivity to place could bring to light a wider range of "rebel bodies" responding to substantively different social realities. A sequel to *Caliban and the Witch* might explore the relation between patriarchal systems and the specific forms of capitalism that developed in different parts of Europe. Comparative research into how diverse cultures as these became integrated into the capitalist world-system could sharpen our grasp of how the First Contradiction of capitalism and the logic of capital accumulation are gendered. Such theoretical advances would benefit from consideration of the ecosystemic consequences of "mechanizing" bodies. That is to say, the relation between labor power and the body must include the biophysical aspects of place-specificity as altered through people-environment interactions.

Notwithstanding the above suggestions for further research, Federici's captivating and instructive contributions to *CNS* represent a culmination of her theoretical endeavors, drawing on both academic activities and experience of political organizing. In my view, her work makes an enormous contribution to ecosocialist and ecofeminist theory and to their shared political praxis. Her work directly addresses contemporary struggles for social justice

worldwide, and one hopes that the historical lessons derived from this analysis will inspire further constructive political strategies, which is her stated intention.