

# Capital and the Body: A Rejoinder to Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro

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I thank Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro for his thoughtful critique and suggestions for further research. His comments on my work on “the body” in the transition to capitalism, and the book *Caliban and the Witch*, from which my two-part *Capitalism Nature Socialism* essay is drawn, deserves a longer response than I can presently provide. So I will address only a few of his points here.

Engel-Di Mauro argues that my presentation suffers from important omissions. He states, for instance, that an ecofeminist analysis of the effects of capitalist development on the body should have given more space to health consequences, as well as consequences for non-human agents. But in saying this, I think he overlooks my main object in writing *Caliban and the Witch*, which was to open the way to rethinking the transition to capitalism from the viewpoint of “the reproduction of labor power.” The fact that the book is circumscribed by the 16th and 17th centuries indicates that my intentions were not encyclopedic ones. It is also worth keeping in mind that some areas of analysis that Engel-Di Mauro considers necessary for a full understanding of the effects of capitalism on the body (e.g. the effects of capitalism on non-human agents such as viruses) fall outside the scope not only of the book, but of my expertise as well.

I agree with Engel-Di Mauro that the inclusion of Holland and other countries, such as Poland or Sweden, would have enriched my discussion of the witch-hunt. But I believe that the material I have gathered validates my hypothesis concerning the relation between witch-hunting in 16th and 17th century Europe and the onset of capitalist accumulation. And I am confident that my conclusions are confirmed by the discussion of witch-hunting in the countries I mentioned. In sum, I did not intend this book to be the end point of the discussion of the effects of capitalist development on women, the body, and the reproduction of labor power. Instead, I saw it as the beginning of a new research project to which others will also contribute.

## **Bodies are Not Trans-historical**

I particularly welcome Engel-Di Mauro's suggestion that I clarify my conception of the relation between the body and labor power, a concept he feels is made ambiguous by my metaphor of the “container.” In response to my claim that:

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.□

Engel-Di Mauro writes:

... 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.

I want to state emphatically that I do not believe that labor power has a separate existence abstracted from other powers of the body. The capacity to work is not a substantive, identifiable, transhistorical reality. What I am referring to here is the

capitalist project to reduce all the body's powers to the “capacity to work,” to produce this capacity, through the disciplining and mechanization of the body, and to subordinate to it all other bodily powers, for example, to love, nourish, communicate.

This project has always been contested, even though the resistance to it has rarely been recognized by Marxists as part of “class struggle.” The “container metaphor” (that the body contains a separable thing called labor power that can be bought and sold) is applicable only in this context, and certainly does not exhaust the role of the body in capitalism. So, the use of the “container metaphor” in no way implies a view of my own that labor power is a thing or a substance. Marx perhaps encouraged this interpretation, by focusing on the property aspect of labor power, as he wished to differentiate a capitalist wage system from a slave economy and to describe the functioning of the labor market. He also “reduced” the value of labor power to the “basket” of commodities consumed in its production. My approach, however, precludes such an interpretation, as I emphasize again, that the capacity to labor is not a thing but a “power” of the body, and one that is historically defined and must be produced and reproduced under specific historical conditions. Finally, as a feminist, I am of course, deeply aware that the value of labor power is not reducible to the value of the commodities that a worker consumes in order to be available for work, for such an assumption ignores the “invisible” reproductive labor supplied to the capitalist economy.

Engel-Di Mauro further argues that I give insufficient consideration to the geographic context and conjunctural aspects of the witch-hunt. I have, however, stressed in my work that the hunt lasted for more than two centuries; that its objectives and targets changed in this process; and, like the contemporary “war on terror,” it accomplished a variety tasks. Undoubtedly, there are aspects of the witch-hunt in Europe and America that are irreducible to the logic of “primitive accumulation.” But again, my intention was to understand this historical event in its broadest, structural features and present a synthesis, necessarily transcending many regional and temporal variations. The same applies to my reading of the witch-hunts that have emerged in our times, for instance, in parts in Africa and South America. Although these hunts are motivated by different factors, I believe a full analysis will show that the soil on which they have grown is the contemporary capitalist globalization, or accumulation, process□

### **The Primacy of Social Reproduction**

Finally, I respond to Engel-Di Mauro's critique of a position he reads in my discussion of the differences between the fate of Eastern and Western European agricultural workers in the 16th and 17th centuries. He writes:

Federici's occasional lack of contextual specificity may explain an inconsistency in her interpretations of demographic trends in different parts of Europe. While the “second serfdom” in eastern Europe is deemed the result of a “population scarcity” that gave landlords an advantage, a sharp demographic drop in western Europe is viewed as creating the conditions for greater peasant empowerment.

Here I think Engel-Di Mauro misinterprets my analysis of the effects of the Black Death on workers' power in the first chapter of *Caliban and the Witch*. I have never claimed that demographic change determines class power. In fact, such a claim would clash with one of the main theses of the book. This is that social reproduction (itself, a cause of demographic change) is “the primary field” of class struggle, and it largely involves the agency of women. More importantly, my section on the Black Death is very

clear that peasants and artisans in Europe “got the upper hand” in the aftermath of the plague, not only because the scarcity of workers gave them new bargaining power. Rather, I attribute this to the long history of struggle and organization in which they had been involved in the decades before the epidemic. Indeed, I stress that the “labor crisis” of the late Middle Ages was primarily a political one.

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My passing remark on the so-called “second serfdom” in Eastern Europe was consistent with this view. I agree, however, that more details on the context in which the enserfment of agricultural workers in the East took place would have clarified this point. I could have added that population scarcity was crucial in the East in a context in which serfdom was imposed on a previously free peasantry. Further, I could have added that resistance of the rural population was weakened by the absence of large towns to flee to. And the drive of landlords to fix rural workers to the soil was incentivized by the emergence of a new global economy and the possibility of directing agricultural production to an external market. This context has been studied by authors like Kamen and Wallerstein, who explain why in the 16th and 17th centuries the rise of agrarian capitalism gave place to enserfment in the East, whereas it led to dispossession of the agricultural workforce in the West.

My response to Engel-Di Mauro’s commentary is two-sided. I wholeheartedly agree that the book could have included more aspects of the “transition.” However, *Caliban and the Witch* was never intended to be a complete analysis of the effects of capitalist development even with regard to questions of the body and reproduction. I myself can list a number of subjects that I would have liked to cover more extensively but had to programmatically exclude from this book for the sake of sharper articulation of its theses. It was with great difficulty and ambiguity, for instance, that I left out discussion of the impact of capitalist development on the position of children and child-raising, a topic that I plan to approach in a further work. So I am looking forward to further dialogue with Engel-Di Mauro and other readers of *CNS* on these issues. As he points out, the impact of capitalism on the body in its ecological, class and gender dimensions is only just beginning, despite earlier work by Merchant, Foucault and many others. It is to be hoped that the present Ecosocialist-Ecofeminist forum will facilitate this long overdue discussion and that *CNS* will embrace it as one of its theoretic foci.