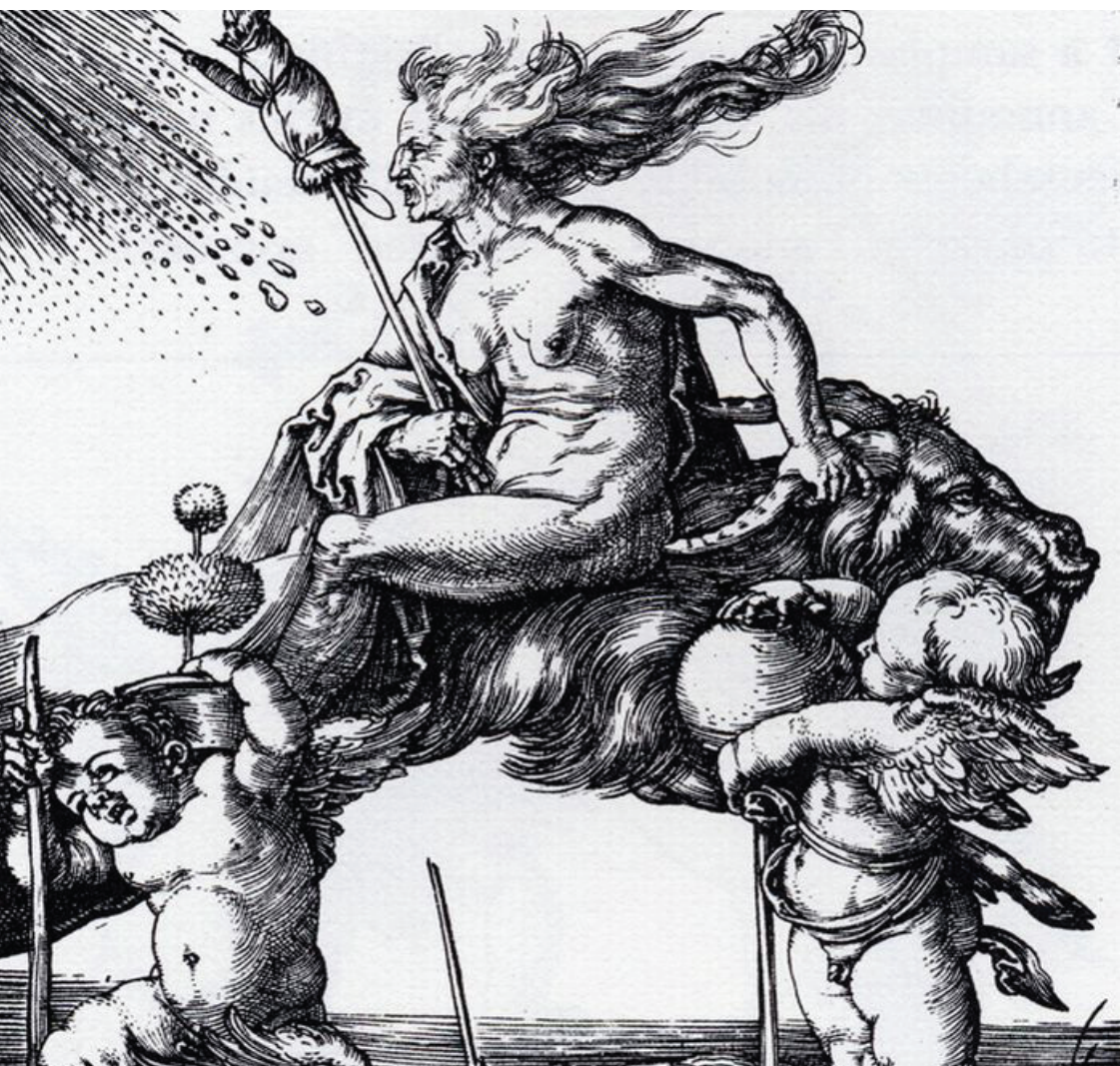


Women, Witchhunts, and the Reproduction of the Capitalist World

A Conversation with Silvia Federici



The following interview was conducted by Labournet in Berlin in 2012 on the occasion of the German translation of Federici's work *Caliban and the Witch - Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*. The interview can be found on Labournet's website: <http://de.labournet.tv/video/6381/caliban-und-die-hexe>

Minor edits have been made here and there to the text of the original, for the purposes of readability. We also modified the title.

ill-will-editions.tumblr.com

illwill@riseup.net

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A Conversation With Silvia Federici about *Caliban and
the Witch*

I am a teacher, I am a writer. This is my standard self-presentation. But, above all, since at least the 1970's I have been working as a feminist and an activist. I have been writing on women's theory, women's history. And I have also been involved in many other political movements, for example, the anti-globalization movement, the movement around education, particularly around students' and teachers' struggles, the anti-death-penalty-movement. Presently, I am very interested in the Occupy-movement and the movement around the commons.

You were also involved in the women's movement and the labor movement in Italy. How was your relation to the movements in Italy?

My relationship to the women's movement in Italy was through the Wages for Housework network. The international Wages for Housework campaign came into existence in 1972. In the summer of 1972 a number of women from different countries met in Padova. That was the beginning of the launching of the campaign for wages for housework. So my relationship to women in Italy was through this network, although it has continued long beyond the end of the network itself. I still have many contacts.

The book *Caliban and the Witch* came out much later. How is your earlier involvement in this movement linked to the book. When did you get the idea to do this research?

I began in the mid-70s. As I wrote in the preface to *Caliban and the Witch*, I was really interested in looking at the history of what used to be called women's oppression, and to see how it has changed capitalism, in response to many of the debates that were taking place in the women's movement, as to whether the gender-based discrimination was a legacy of tradition, a remnant of previous patriarchal relation, or a type of social reality specific to capitalism. So that is how I began this historical work.

That started with the 19th century, and then for lack of good answers took

me back to the Middle Ages. And then, after a while, I began to collaborate with Leopolda Fortunati. As I wrote in the preface of *Caliban and the Witch*, we had an early version of this work in Italian, but actually quite different, that came out in in 1984. But there I began to sketch the discussion of the witchhunt and the discussion of the transformation of the body in capitalism, but we also discussed other issues such as for example, the transformation that child-raising undergoes in the beginning of capitalist development. So, this is a work that has accompanied me for decades. By 2004, I had been with it almost thirty years.

There is this book you published in Italy in 1984. How did you organize the research? How did you do the research, was it with Fortunati and others?

We worked quite separately because I was in New York and she was in Padova. So we worked in a separate way, even though we kind of exchanged some basic information. That [book] was concentrated on looking at different aspects of the reorganization of reproduction. For example, it has a chapter on the transformation of forms of sociality, it has a chapter on, precisely, the redefinition of the figure of the child, it has a chapter specifically on the question of sexuality. But the framework of that book was somewhat different. In a way, it was before the beginning of globalization, and one of the ideas there was to show that not only the classic Marxist approach to primitive accumulation but also the Operaist approach to class struggle and to capitalist development were unsatisfactory.

One of the themes in the introduction was “first comes society”, meaning: first comes the reproduction of labor power and then comes the factory, which reversed, for example, the Trontian idea that the factory is the prime mover, and, in a sense, the factory then also changes society. Our argument was, that when you look at the history of capitalism you see that capitalism first had to form a certain type of laborer and only in a later period creates on the basis of the formation of that type of laborer a certain type of organization of work, particularly, a large-scale organization of industrial work.

Before we turn to *Caliban and the Witch*...After publishing the Italian book 20 years before you published *Caliban*, how did that discus-

sion continue? Did you collaborate with others?

No. I continued the work pretty much by myself, but one major development that took place was the fact that by the early 80s I went to Africa. I was in Africa for about three years, and that experience was fundamental because in Africa I saw really the beginning of globalization, I saw what were the first elements of the return of primitive accumulation, through the imposition of structural adjustment and all the policies that were enacted in response to the debt crisis.

Again, as I wrote in the introduction to *Caliban*, I was continuously brought back to the period of primitive accumulation, but what was unfolding under my eyes, included the fact that the discussion about the debt crisis, the conditions posed by the IMF and the discussion of austerity came hand in hand with a full ideological attack on women, which in many ways were accused of having caused the crisis with their excessive demand and with their pressure on the worker, the family member, etc. for better living conditions. So the striking similarity between the processes that I saw unfolding in the 80's in Nigeria and what I had been reading concerning the period of primitive accumulation was very important for my own rethinking and my own placing of that discussion in a broader framework.

Let's talk about the book. It is divided in several chapters. Could you describe the content and the main arguments?

The book is made of a number of chapters. The first one is a chapter about the crisis of feudalism and, in particular, is a chapter that looks at the reasons why capitalism developed, which was fundamental in my view in order to understand what would be the modalities of the new structures that capitalism had to implement. So I, in particular, was concerned with demystifying and rejecting the assumption that capitalism was a kind of evolution out of economic structures that had developed in the middle ages, and showing that capitalism was a counterrevolution, that capitalism was the response to a whole set of social movements of struggle. That was really important for me because it connected to and gave me an insight into the struggle that women had been making against feudal power. Therefore an insight into why the development of capitalism had to start with this massive attack on

women.

This was for me one of the most exciting and satisfying researches, because it brought me in contact with a whole set of social movements that I knew vaguely of, like the heretic movement, from my early studies of European history. I had no idea how important these movements had been, because the heretic movement was really a movement of social struggle. It was a movement against feudal power but also the beginning of commercialization and of social relations. I also began to see the role of women in this heretic movement which was very strong. Women had a central presence in those movements. So this was important, because it allowed me to say two things in terms of understanding capitalism.

Number one, capitalism came in response to a struggle, and, in particular, in response to a labor crisis, a crisis of the command over labor that this movement had produced. Therefore, not accidentally, capitalism was vitally interested in creating relations that would maximize the exploitation of labor.

Second, that within this struggle woman played an important role. The refusal of certain relations with men and also a particular relation to procreation had played an important role in this struggle. For example, the heretic movement gave women a certain status of parity with men. Also, it was a movement that was critical with respect to women's subordination but also the exclusion of women from positions of some power, for example, in the organization and administration of sacraments. So, that, too, was important because it opened the possibility of understanding why [there was] this specific attack on women.

So that is the first chapter...

Yes, the second chapter is a broad analysis of the main processes that constituted the transition to capitalism. In other words, it's a chapter that tries to rethink the process of accumulation that Marx writes about at the end of *Capital* Vol.1., but rethought from a different point of view. In fact, it writes the history that Marx does not write, which is the history of primitive accumulation from the point of view of the transformation in the reproduction of labor power, and also the transformation in the position of women. For

instance, it goes back and reexamines the enclosures, the separation of workers from their land, but also examines not only the separation of the workers from their land, but one of the key points in the analysis is that this was only the beginning of the development of capitalism, of equal importance was the separation of production and reproduction. In fact, this is one of the main themes of that second chapter. In other words, capitalism begins not only with the divorcing of the peasantry from their land, which, by the way, also takes place in the New World, but begins with the separation, not physical but in terms of social relations, of production and reproduction.

From an early stage, in the 16th and 17th century we begin to see that there is a whole set of activities that begin to not appear as economic activities, and these are reproductive activities. And these activities were more and more naturalized, gendered and identified as women's work. This is the center of this chapter, to show when we speak of the precondition for the development of capitalism we have to speak of a process that is much wider than Marx assumed, and that also includes the formation of a whole sphere of activities that is structurally devalued. That devaluation is so structural that throughout all this transformation capitalism has always reproduced that devaluation down to our day. I think extended globalization is a return of primitive accumulation. At the center of it, you have that devaluation of reproductive activities.

The third chapter is a chapter about the body. It looks at what happens to the body in the capitalist organization of production and work. The reason for that chapter is partially again to continue that history that Marx does not write. Partially, it is to highlight the fact that capitalism is a very unique system, different and specific with respect to other forms of exploitation in that it sees labor as a fundamental form of wealth, which is very important in terms of the type of disciplinary regime that it has to implement. The moment in which you see that labor is the fundamental form of wealth, there is a whole policy towards the body that has to be put into place. Because then the body is this great field of resources. They have to be maximized, they have to be developed. But, of course, there is dialectic of development and repression. I am very critical here of Foucault. He always stresses the moment of development that new productive capacities are developing. We cannot write the history only from the point of view of repression. Very true, but repression is the first moment. You cannot have the development of

new capacities in the body without the destruction of a whole set of forms of behavior, practices, and beliefs that had been fundamental in the culture of pre-capitalist society, including medieval society in Europe.

So, the third chapter is a description of the different strategies that through the laws, through the transformation of the organization of everyday life, capitalism puts into place. And, simultaneously, also it is a description of how this transformation is then reflected in the mediated way in the discursive, disciplinary field. In other words, in the intellectual, philosophical discussion of the time, for example, in the works of Descartes, in the works of Hobbes. For instance, he interprets the rise of Cartesianism as a particular response to the class struggle, and as a response to the needs of the new discipline of work, the demands and processes of “self-exploitation”, self-management and so forth.

Then there is the fourth chapter on the witchhunts. That is a long analysis of how they took place, what the witch-hunt was in essence in different countries, with all the varieties depending on the particular countries. And then fundamentally, it is an attempt to explain how the witch-hunt relates to the broader attack on the proletariat and the broader process of primitive accumulation that was taking place in this period. And it looks at the different ways in which the witchhunt connects to these developments by looking at who were the witches, from the point of view of the social status, and what were the crimes they were accused of. It shows that there is a direct connection between witchcraft charges and the process of land enclosure. There is also a relationship between witchcraft trials and the attack and redefinition of women’s sexuality, which is disciplined towards its reproductive role. Because one of the key tasks in this moment for capitalism is also to take control over women’s reproductive capacities. The control of women’s bodies, women’s reproduction, biological reproduction and women’s sexuality are extremely important, both in terms of the new discipline of labor but also in terms of actually using the female body as an instrument for the reproduction of the working class, the biological recreation of a new generation of workers, and it shows in fact how the witchhunt served these goals.

Here again is a polemic, if you want, with Marx and Foucault. Both do not recognize the importance of this event, which I see as fundamental to the formation of modern capitalist society. It is one of the great massacres that

inaugurates the advent of modern capitalism. You have the slave trade, you have the conquest of the Americas, you have the persecution of the witches.

The last chapter, in a way, takes some of the analysis of the previous four to the New World. It shows that the persecution of witches is not purely a European phenomena, but actually starting from the last part of the 16th century, it is exported to the so-called 'New World'. In fact, the execution of witchcraft is broadly used by missionaries and conquistadors, both as a means of conquest, as a means of breaking down resistances, and specifically also to implement a new division of labor between women and men in the New World as well. And it looks at it particularly with reference to the Andes and with reference also to the struggles that women in the Andes already in the 16th century mount against colonization and against the dominance of the priest, against the dominance of the new religion.

I am glad that you mentioned your critique of Marx and Foucault. But let's start earlier. You mentioned the separation between production and reproduction in the early stages of the making of capitalism. What was the force? How was the separation enforced?

The separation between production and reproduction was enforced in many ways. One of the things, for instance, that you begin to notice in the 16th century in many parts of Europe is the exclusion of women from the guilds which had been the organization of workers. In Germany, in a number of towns, you even have a municipal proscription that argues that women should not engage in wage labor. And we have documents showing that women had to appeal, for example, to the local municipalities to be allowed to do work for a wage, often with the argument that they were widows and they did not have other means of support.

So you find that within the course of a century the only jobs that women could actually do were reproductive jobs, particularly as handmaids or domestic workers or nurses. Being a wet nurse was a very common job for peasant women, or washer woman. So from new forms of wage labor women were excluded until the last part of the 18th century when women were inserted into industrialization. They became the labor force for the new factories. Together with that you have a massive expansion of prostitution. I speak in

the book about the fact that all of a sudden prostitution becomes a mass phenomenon. And interesting enough, of course, it begins to be criminalized, which it was not in the Middle Ages.

You mention that women were excluded from the guilds. And later you talk about the role of the state in this process of creating two parts of a new class. What was the role of the state?

The state plays an extremely important part in this period in the creation of a whole structure that supports the new sexual division of labor. I already mentioned the regulations of work and of sexuality, for example, the criminalization of prostitution, but you also have a whole new set of regulation that begin to punish in an unprecedented manner—for example, attempts to control reproductive capacity. There is, for instance, a whole new policing of the process of procreation that has a tremendous impact on the life of women. And any [transgression] of that policy begins to be criminalized and penalized with death. For instance, almost as many women were persecuted and executed for infanticide as for witchcraft.

Infanticide in the 16th and 17th century was the second largest penalty or crime for which women were penalized. And, of course, most important of all, the state is the place from which all the legislation against witches emanated. Unlike the witchhunts that are taking place today – of which I will speak later – it is the state. The witchhunt is a mass persecution that took place by totally legal means. It was launched in most countries by state legislation. It is the state that declares: “witches, we have to persecute them, the population has to assist us in this task”... These ordinances are then read in the churches, then propagated throughout the villages and the towns. Then everybody is asked to take a position, on one side or the other. If you do not collaborate, of course, you are in danger of being accused as a witch. So the state has a central role in the formation of the new sexual division of labor and also the new gender roles.

One thing I want to clarify, because I think most people are not familiar with this argument at all. You describe capitalism or capital itself as a counter-revolution against anti-feudal resistance. That is very

complex. Could you describe it? Why counter-revolution and against who? The other picture would be capitalism as an anti-feudal reaction, but you have a different view.

Yes, I have a very different view. There is a liberal view that the figure of the capitalist is a development of the figure of the merchant. That at a certain point in the 13th and 14th century, with the revitalization of commerce after the big breakdown due to the “barbarian” invasions, commerce starts again in the urban centers of the Middle Ages. We begin to see forms of proto-capitalism, and from that figure some people even argue—on the basis of long distance trade to procure luxuries for the nobility—that capitalism develops out of this ground.

I do not read it that way. When you see the kind of policies and the kinds of developments that capitalism puts into place, and you see it not in one area only but you see it on a more global scale, you realize that in fact the main preoccupation that the proto-capitalist class had was to regain control over work. Capitalism comes out of a crisis. It is clearly the response to the crisis of a whole set of structures, to the fact that you have an aristocratic class but also a merchant class.

Not only the aristocratic class, but the famous merchant class from which capitalism is supposed to have developed, are in crisis by the 14th century. And they are in crisis after the weight of labor struggles. And capitalism responds directly to those labor struggles. The best evidence that I bring to it, and that is not my discovery, is the intensity of struggles in the urban and rural areas in this period, for example, the peasant wars that sweep through Europe, in Spain, France, Germany, England, and also the struggles of artisans. So you see a structure that cannot reproduce itself. And then you see the response that it takes, for example, the Conquest. Capital is not a new class. It is a new class from the point view of social relations, but it is basically the feudal lord in England who recycles himself. He is the merchant.

It is basically the clergy that launches a whole set of parallel but combined developments. The conquest, and so by externalizing, responding to the crisis by acquiring new assets, acquiring new laborers through external conquest. The Americas provide the bullion that creates a market economy

in Europe. It is the silver that comes from the New World that creates the market economy. So it is very clear that it [capitalism] does not come out of an evolutionary process. That the forces that lead to capitalism were not present in Europe.

What was present in Europe was the crisis of a system that could not reproduce itself, was the crisis of a ruling class that could not reproduce itself. And that ruling class had to transmogrify itself and had to go outside of its borders to procure the assets, to procure the labor, to procure the wealth that would enable it to relaunch itself in a new way. And it is the process. I like to say that capitalism begins to form as a system, as a result of many developments, of many initiatives which begin to take on a particular configuration...that begin to be coordinated and take on a particular configuration. By the end of the 16th century it is already very visible in the form of a new global economy, the beginning of a global economy.

One thing you already addressed, but just to have it as a clear point, is your critique of the concept of primitive accumulation from Marx. Actually, that is the next process, historically, from what you just described. You mention the enclosures, Marx also draws on this. Could you describe it, using Marx' concept and your critique of that concept?

Two things are problematic in Marx and primitive accumulation. First of all, he only sees as crucial, as foundational of the new capitalist system, this process of separation of the workers from the means of production, the expulsion of the peasants and so forth. That is very important, but it is not sufficient. And even adding to it the attack, the bloody legislation against the vagabond, that is very important but is not enough. One first thing that I wanted to show is that there is a lot more than that. When you speak of the separation we begin to have the formation of this other sphere of activities that begin to disappear, to become invisible, that they are now naturalized as women's work. That is a whole area that Marx does not see. The other part of it, and of course there is a big debate on it now, and I have to say, Marx is not clear on that point, so you can stretch Marx to say both sides in my view. The question is whether for Marx primitive accumulation is a pro-

cess that occurs at the beginning of capitalism and is specific to that phase, or that is a process that continues and returns. So there are many positions on that. Whatever Marx may have said, there are many statements that may lean one way or the other, but my position is that primitive accumulation is not fixed, is not an event that is limited to the origin of capitalism, is an event that has continuously returned through the history of capitalism. If you want you can even say that it is present in every moment of the capitalist relation, because every moment of capitalist relations is premised on the separation of people from their means of reproduction. But outside, when you look at the history of capitalism you see those great moments of return of primitive accumulation, which to me are those moments in which capitalism is in crisis and in which in order to regain the command over the process of accumulation the capitalist class has to engage in this massive attacks, through war, through expropriation, for instance, colonization. It is not an accident that the heyday of imperialism coincides with the peak of workers' struggles in Europe, the peak of the socialist movement in Europe in the last part of the 19th century. I read for example, World War I or World War II as those moments in which capitalism needs to disaccumulate the working class.

While the essence of capitalism is the accumulation of labor power, those wars are the disaccumulation which is a disaccumulation of the combative potential. What was destroyed on the fields of World War I and World War II is the working class that has made the Russian Revolution, which was a potential also in Europe.

It is important to keep this in mind: primitive accumulation is connected to this important moment in which capitalism is in crisis and needs the command over labor. In looking at the process of globalization today to understand what globalization is, where it comes from, what it is attempting to achieve. I think this is very much in line with the project of the capitalist class in those moments, like, for example, the launching of colonial conquest, the launching of the imperialist drive towards Africa and so forth. What we see through the angle of globalization is the goal of expanding the labor market, expropriating people. The expansion of the labor market as a precondition for restoring the discipline of work.

One more question on this transition to capitalism in Marx or from a

Marxist position, because Marx—and even more so Marxists—see capitalism as a precondition of communism and the development of productive forces as a precondition. So somehow when you talk about anti-feudal struggles or even a commons-discussion later on, it looks like a critique of that.

Yes, it is a critique of that, because I think that this nice scheme of the forces of production and the relations of production suggests that you could separate the two. That once you have liberated the forces of production a certain type of organization of work including technology from the particular property relations that are typical of capitalism, then you have the condition for a communist society. That view I am completely critical of. First of all, you cannot separate the so-called 'relations of production'. Take the division of labor: most productive from the point of view of the accumulation and disciplining of labor, of the organization of work, has been the sexual and international division of labor, the creation of different labor regimes.

You cannot separate the development of the productive forces from the type of relations that are actually put into place. [The productive forces are] developed through the sexual division of labor, which means that the development of the productive forces is at the same time the development of a division within the working class. So the idea that you can make the separation of one from the other, that capitalism can just disgorge this technology and organization of techniques and now we can take them out and insert them into a form of egalitarian relations, etc., is a myth, because part of this productivity has been precisely that capacity to organize hierarchy, to organize division within the working class.

Let's turn to the witchhunt. In the book you develop your ideas as a critique of existing studies on the witchhunt. Could you describe this? How was it [the witchhunt] described and what is your critique?

In recent time there has been a decline of those studies. Those studies peaked for a while as a consequence of the women's movement. It was the women's movement that brought back the question of witchhunting. There was a number of studies that were inspired by it. But now it is declining

again. Generally most of these studies either stayed away from trying to find a general motivation for this persecution, and they have only concentrated on analyzing the enabling condition, or it was possible because of this, it was possible because of that. But they never try to trace a cause or connection. Or if they have tried to trace a cause or connection, they have gone to the religious war, the reformation, basically, religious conflicts. There has been little attempt to connect. Except, actually, feminists have been really the first who have really begun to connect the question of the witch-hunts to processes of primitive accumulation, to the expulsion of the peasantry. For example, Starhawk and Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, hinted the connection between the expulsion of the peasantry from the commons and the slave trade and the witch-hunt.

Previous analyzes by historians have been very unsatisfactory in that way. Some have spoken about the transformation, the christianization of the peasantry that was necessary as a cultural means to prepare for capitalism. My analysis is that the witchhunt is obviously a very fundamental process. I have to say one exception, very important, that I found as I was working doing this research. An Italian historian and philosopher Luciano Perinotto who I quote. He was very clear. He is to me quite exceptional, in that he states that the witchhunt is a fundamental development in the rise of capitalism, that it is one of those developments which are at the gate of the rise of capitalism.

He also saw, unlike others, that the witch-hunt was not only European but it was also a global phenomenon, particularly a phenomenon that in the 16th and 17th century was brought to the American colonies. In my view, when you look at the chronology, the period in which the witchhunt takes place, when you look at who the witches were, the means of the persecution and what sort of crimes they were accused of, and the effects, the consequences of that persecution, you are immediately brought into a world which is not the world of feudal relations.

For example, a classical argument coming from the enlightenment by historians was that this was the fruit of clerical superstition under the dominance of the church. The witch-hunt was due to superstition and the dominance of the church in the Middle Ages. Now, the witch-hunt in Europe, when you look at it chronologically begins to take place in a very massive

way by the late part of the 16th century. You have a crescendo of witchhunting that starts in the mid-15th century. Around 1450 or 1460 we begin to see the first demonologies, 1480 you have the *Malleus Maleficarum* which was one of the main texts by Dominican friars, one of the main texts used then for many years by witchhunters. And we also begin to see more trials. But the moment in which the witchhunt massified, in particular in places like Germany, Scotland, Switzerland, parts of Italy, England, France, less in Spain – there were not that many witch-hunts in Spain, a very interesting exception that is useful to study – in France, it is really the period between 1570s and 1650s. And witch-hunts continued up for another century, but diminishing in importance and in number.

When you look at that period, it is a very interesting period. It is a period in which there is nothing left of feudalism, you are in the middle of the development of capitalist relations, and you are in the middle of the fiercest attack on the workers population that you can imagine. Because this is the moment when, in conjunction with the colonization of the Americas, you have the arrival of the bullion which is like the wind that destroys the economic relationship throughout a good part of Western Europe, creating a massive process of pauperization, the kind of pauperization that we have seen in Africa with structural adjustment, monetary devaluation. You see it in Europe in the very period of the witch-hunt. It is a period of massive struggle against enclosures, in which women had a very prominent place, massive uprising.

It is also, of course, a period of expulsion of people from their land, and it is the period in which all the nuts and bolts [were installed] in terms of new legislation, new regulation on the local and national level, regulating where workers are supposed to live, regulating sexual relationships, regulating prostitution, regulating reproduction, where you see the beginning of a reproductive code being put into place, as well as the formation of the workhouse. People being closed into workhouses if they refuse to work etc. When you look at this chronology you have to ask yourself: what is the relationship to the witchhunts? And when you begin to see who these women were, you see that there is a direct correspondence between the women who have been accused of being witches and those rebel subjects that capitalism was trying to destroy. Rebel in the sense that they were rebelling against the new rules, but also rebel because they represented a world that

capitalism had to destroy. Whether they rebelled or not, they represented a whole network of practices and belief and values that in one way or another was being destroyed. This is what I tried to bring out. And, of course, it is the beginning. The hope with which I have written this book, has been that others will pick up that work. I believe there is a lot more to be discovered. But I think this book offers some general guidelines. For example, the relationship between the witchhunt and enclosure. The issue of land is very important. Maybe we will come back to it later. Similarly, the relationship between witchhunting and the reorganization of family life, the reorganization of sexual relationships. The fact that very often the witch is a prostitute or has been a prostitute in her youth, or she has children outside of marriages, or she has had a sexual relationship outside of her class.

Many women who had relationships with men of the upper classes were accused of being witches. So of course the question of abortion, infanticide, contraception, all those practices are immediately demonized, are immediately labeled as practices, that are geared to destroy the life of children etc. This is what the chapter on the witchhunt tries to show. As a major initiative by the state against a large group of people the witch-hunt could be used in many different ways. I often make a parallel with the War on Terror today. The War on Terror today can be used to attack a broad variety of people, for example, unionists, activists. We have seen it recently in the United States how the War on Terror can be used also to discipline very peaceful movements, but they represent a certain threat to state and capital policies.

You already mentioned where it happened. How many were affected? All women were affected, in a way, but how many were actually accused? That is one question. The more important ones are: How were they made witches? And who made a woman a witch?

There has been a big dispute about the size of the witch-hunt. Unfortunately this is a question that we will never be able to resolve because so many archives were destroyed during the two world wars. As a result, particularly in Germany a lot of archives and material has been lost, but not only there. Also there are still a lot of archives and materials that have not been analyzed.

There is a capillary work that has to be done through churches, small villages and so forth. That work is by no means completed. Nevertheless, I would say that in my estimate, from the arguments and documentation that I have seen, we are talking about maybe 300,000 women, roughly speaking, in the period of a couple of centuries. There are wild figures that were often quoted, like millions. I do not think that this is possible. There is no evidence for it. But I think that several hundred thousand is a more feasible figure. The opposite extreme is the idea of 6.000 or 7.000 which has been achieved just by counting some of the main trials that took place. But in many cases the way the trial of a witch or a group of women was reported is several women were killed, several women were burned, were executed, without numbers been given.

In terms of the making of a witch: The making of a witch could be highly varied. There is a lot to be said here about the transformation that the organization of the witchhunt goes through in the course of the two and a half centuries, when it climaxed. For instance, it is interesting that at the beginning the charges are always against an organization, against a collectivity. More and more, as time goes by, the charges are more against individual people, which in my view reflects the increasing atomization of relations, the individualization of social relations. A very classical way in which a women is labeled a witch is that she generally is an older women, has to depend on her neighbors, neighbors who are better off, for sustenance. She begs. Many witches, especially in England, were beggars, but not only in England. These were older women.

Clearly, the fact that older women had to beg to support themselves, had to go from house to house to ask for some wine, for some milk, for some bread, already indicates that a lot has taken place. Because in the Middle Ages you would not have this situation. In the Middle Ages provisions were made for the elderly. You would not have older women living alone. Usually there would be a transaction in the servile or in the peasant community. In the peasant community, working at the dependence of a feudal lord, there were provisions made for all the people when the younger generation took over the house and took over the management of the land. So the fact that these women were alone and begging indicates exactly a society that has gone through the process of enclosure. So they beg, often they are refused. Together with capitalism comes a new ideology that disparages the idea of

charity. And they curse, and upon being cursed immediately they are accused of having procured the death of a child or the illness, at least of an animal and so forth. Or they are accused of storms, for example there are storms that destroy the crops of the community and then particular women are accused of having induced these storms. So when you look at the phenomenology of the witchhunt there are certain things that really stand out.

The first thing that stands out is that the first act of the witchhunt comes from the above. In other words, it comes with legislation. And this legislation is brought to the village level or to the town level, it is brought through the priest, at the church, in other words, it is an ideology and it is the fear that is propagated from above. And it is propagated in ways that leave no doubt that if you do not collaborate you will also be entangled in the network of accusation. Second, when you look at this phenomenology you see that there is a landscape in which the witchhunt occurs, that has gone already through major economic reorganization because you find there is already a polarization in terms of the distances between people have become much wider than those that existed in the feudal communities, that you already have a population of people who are landless or who have no means of subsistence, which, again, would have been very uncommon in the feudal society.

So the making of a witch is a making that has many components. And more and more you have a literature of demonology creating the figure of the witch. That is very interesting. They are now telling: These people you have to be aware of. These people do not deserve any type of help, these people are dangerous. So increasingly they are creating a mass psychosis, at least in certain sectors of the population, warning them that those who are the victims of the new transformation in economic relations not only do not have to be helped but they are potentially dangerous. This is the environment in which accusation of witchcraft proliferates.

You published the book in 2004. What happened afterwards? Was there a discourse in the feminist scene? What went on?

I think that the book has had a certain influence on the feminist scene, and not only the feminist scene. I think it has had a very good reception, and I think it had a very good reception because in a way it filled a certain histori-

cal hole that was very prominent in terms understanding the first phase of capitalist development. In that way, it has placed the question of the witch-hunt again at the center of interest in terms of various social movements. Particularly because we are witnessing a return of witchhunting. I think this is a very important fact we have to concentrate upon.

In the last three decades, hand in hand with globalization there has been, in many parts of the world, particularly Africa but also India, also Nepal, a return of witchcraft accusations and of attacks and physical assaults on women. Many have been killed. It is calculated at least 20.000 to 30.000 women have been killed just in Africa. For example, in countries like South Africa, Tanzania, Ghana and many others. Many women have been chased from their villages, in the north of Ghana, in Zambia, that is another country, Nigeria. In the North of Ghana there are witches camps, there are camps in which women who have been expelled from their communities have been forced to go. And they live there in very miserable conditions, with some money provided by NGOs and supervision by some local chiefs.

So this question has generated some interest, not as much as I would have expected. From a disciplinary point of view, those who have studied this phenomenon being predominately anthropologists. Their interest has not even been so much on the attacks on women but their interest has been primarily on the way the discourse of the occult has returned in the political discourse in Africa. For example, authors like Jean and John Comaroff, two anthropologists who are quite famous. They have written a number of books that analyze why now politicians in Africa are attributing to themselves magical power. But that is a very different thing than this specific attack on women, which in a way brings back much more directly the memory of the witch-hunts of the 16th and 17th century, because today again it is women who are older, who are poor, who are predominantly in the rural areas, and they are again accused of causing the death of relatives, causing the death of community members by evil practice.

For me, the work I have done on the 16th and 17th century witch-hunt has been extremely important, because immediately it has predisposed me to read this new witchhunt in conjunction with the transformation in economic relations that are taking place in Africa and other parts of the world today, which take the shape of massive attacks on means of subsistence, land ex-

appropriation, land-grabbing. The effect of these developments on relations between men and women, the fact that women are increasingly excluded from forms of communal property, the fact that there is an interest among local chiefs, local authorities – in complicity with foreign companies – in bringing an end to communal land structures and expropriating people from them, all of that clearly is in the background of these new witchhunts.

I would add an important element. It is also the campaign that international institutions are waging against the forms of subsistence that women have set into place and have defended in response to structural adjustment. For example, in response to structural adjustment that has [dismantled] entire communities. A lot of women have taken over land, even in the urban areas, and have begun to produce some food, have begun to create all kinds of subsistence-related forms of trade, food production and so forth that have enabled the community to support itself. These are now very much under attack, by the World Bank and all kinds of agencies who are saying that it is exactly those kind of activities that are the cause of poverty in the world, that actually what women need, communities need is capital, is some money, like the Grameen Bank, micro-credit etc. I have written a number of articles on this matter. I have tried to apply some of the same methodology that I used to understand the witchhunts of the past to understand those of the present, and I see that they are effects of the globalization, they are not cultural realities, but they are effects of globalization.

Apart from these modern accusations and witchhunts, how would you describe the effect of the witchhunt, or this historic defeat, you could say, on women today in general?

That is a very interesting question, because I have come to the conclusion – and here, too, is another field that I really wish somebody [would take up], if I had five lives... Because my view is that the witch-hunt has never ceased. As much of an exaggeration as that may appear to be. Today there is a witchhunt against women taking place in many forms. First of all, the image of the witch has continued to serve as a disciplinary instrument against women. At the end of *Caliban and the Witch* I have some powerful images which show that the female Communards, the so-called *Pétroleuses* were portrayed as witches. So when the capitalist imagination wishes to attack

women it immediately returns to the image of the witch. This bestial creature, all sex and lust, bodily pure matter, no mind, ready to align herself to the devil, and so evil, irrationally evil. The image is there.

And then, over the years, in looking at, for example, all-time Hollywood productions, from the 40's, 50's and 60's, I realized that the image of the witch has always been in the background. So many movies. When we speak of the witch, she does not have to be represented on the top of a broom, or on the top of a goat: this image of the all-evil woman that, for reasons that are indiscernible, is out to destroy men, or to destroy particular men. That has continued as a thematic idea, for example, through many Hollywood productions, down into the present. As in *Fatal Attraction*, particularly, the attack on the woman now who is all into her career and forgets her maternal duties. There has been a return of figures of witches connected with that theme. It is very interesting, for instance, now to look at the differential way in which *Harry Potter*, who is the good boy, who does magic in many good ways, and there is *Narnia* [*The Chronicles of Narnia*], the bad witch that movies have portrayed and shown to children, and she is again the all evil female figure.

I would say, in that sense, the witchhunt has never stopped, ideologically. The witch is still a very potent image, an ideology. There is a witchhunt also taking place in another way, because, for instance, in the United States there is an attack on women that seeks to regain, to restore the control of the state, the control of men over their bodies, over their labor, and it particularly intensifies during times of global crisis, when women are expected to go back home and do a lot of unpaid labor.

So you have, for example, this legislation in the US that wants to again control and penalize women for any kind of things they do when they are pregnant, and it looks at women really as machines for the production of labor power. So there are women now who were accused of first-degree murder in the US because they used drugs when they were pregnant. So now you have to be scared that if you drink wine or use a drug you may be accused of attempted murder against the child you are carrying in your belly. And similar legislation is being contemplated in many states. So I would say that particularly with the escalation of the global crisis witchhunt, the war on women is still with us.

Let's look at it from the other perspective, because I think this is important. When we look at the last decades, of course, there was a strong women's movement that had results, results that we still see today, although there was a backlash as well. And then there is also a positive image of witches within the feminist movement...

Absolutely. I think that what I described is precisely a response to the movement, because it was the women's movement that brought back the interest in the witches, brought back also an evaluation of the figure of the witch. Historically grounded or not, the witch became a sort of image, a symbol of the rebel woman, that the women's movement took on. In Rome, for example, in the course of a big demonstration Italian feminists would make a magical round singing "Tremate, tremate, le streghe son tornate!", "Tremble, tremble, the witches are back!" So that identification with the witches was very powerful, and it was one that inspired many books, beginning with my book. A politicization of the question of witch-hunting... Because the witchhunts had been completely erased, not only erased from history, but depoliticized and ridiculed, I mean, ridiculed in grotesque way. In the United States on Halloween children go out and "Trick or Treat". A whole genocide in which hundreds of thousands of women were murdered and horribly tortured and entire communities devastated is reduced to a little game that children are playing, you have these little girls dressed with the hat of the witches that was put on their head before being burned in many cases and they sport it with no idea that many women met their horrible death that way. So it was very important for the women's movement to actually break their silence and to re-politicize that issue and to reopen that history.

I ask about that positive image because I think it is important, if we talk about "witches". Here, for instance, they have a "Walpurgis-Night" every year which is considered a women's demonstration, using the image of the witch in a positive sense. They try to address all the re-definitions you mention, about sexuality and etc. Is it justified? The freedom of the women to decide what they want to do in all aspects of life is seen [from] the position of a "witch". What do you think about that?

I distinguish in this sense the historical and the political, or the different concepts of political. I am ready to support the use of the image of the witch in that way. At the same time, I would say that the way that the persecution of the witches and witches themselves are understood in certain sections of the women's movement is something that, in my research, I cannot support. This idea, for instance, that the witches in Europe were some sort of alternative religion, they were a sect of women, ancient, fertility-related rituals, which was a theory that in the 20s was launched by a British anthropologist. That is a view I cannot [support]. Witches were in many case proletarian women – I call them proletarian in the broad sense of the term – poor, lower class, rural or urban women.

Sure they carried with themselves old practices and forms of existence from a pre-capitalist sociality. For example, women throughout the Middle Ages in the urban and rural communities of Europe did most of their work collectively. If you washed, you did it collectively, you harvested collectively. So there was an intense collective life. And that collective life, of course, was also a source of power. And that is destroyed in the witchhunt. But the idea that the witches were a specific group with a specific culture and this women had a sort of feminist consciousness—this I have not been able to find any foundation for.

It also seems would also include specific female spirituality as the motherhood idea...

Yes, that too, exactly. Because the women accused of being witches were a wide variety of women. They were peasant women who were in struggle over land, there were women who were actually practicing healing. They were going from house to house, marking, etc. It was not necessarily that they had a particular form of spirituality. One of my female ancestors in Italy, whom my mother told me about, made a living even in the 19th century marking animals. In other words, you make certain signs and pronounce certain words and probably three centuries ago she would have been burned as a witch. So the healing of animals and humans was a profession for many women. And certainly a source of power, of predicting the future. Other women were accused because of their sexuality, because they had illegal relations, because they had children out of marriage, etc.

So there is a wide variety of female figures. To speak of the witch, the persecution being an attack on particular forms of spirituality is something that so far has no historical verification.

The last question from my side. You know the book will be published in Germany this fall. So I was wondering whether you have any proposals how to pick up on this debate, how to connect them. You gave a few hints already in your talk [three days ago], as to how to connect this book and the subjects of the book with ongoing discussions today. Do you have any proposals?

My proposal would be... I think I like the book whenever it is published to be a beginning in terms of research and analysis of the witchhunt. I hope that the book is a beginning, that somebody takes this book, reads it, and starts of doing new work, and there is going to be another *Caliban and the Witch* ten years from now or whatever. Because I think that there is a lot of issues that should be explored. I myself would like to.

There is so much work to do now that I am continuously divided between the desire to continue that work, which I try as best as I can, particularly, in relation to the present, and moving on to what is happening today in particular in the new struggles. For instance, I have been very interested in developing the theme of the enclosures, the witchhunt and enclosures. In what specific ways the witchhunt relates to the question of enclosures, land enclosure, forest enclosure, that's one part of it, but it is an important part of it and it certainly relates also directly to what is happening now. You have new witchhunts in the context of massive land-grabbing. And it is now recognized, every journalist now recognizes, both in Africa and in India, which are the main places for this new witchhunting, that the connection with land is primary. Of course, it is never exclusive of gender relations, gender hierarchy, because: why women?

So, obviously the issue of hierarchies, the issue of a certain conception of femininity, is in there. But enclosures and land-grabbing provide an important context. I personally hope that somebody picks up this direction. I have done some work, for example, trying to show that when you look at the accusations, particularly in the first period of the witchhunt in Europe,

the accusations relating to animals, the charges that the witches are hurting animals, or they are hurting the crops through their storms—you can almost recompose it, like a puzzle whose pieces all fit together—you see a population which on one side has been expropriated, has had its land expropriated, and the other side one sees the expropriators.

So this kind of analysis is what I would hope would be taken on as a result of this new publication. Of course, in each case, to see the connection with the present, because to me the witchhunt is still with us. One thing I have learned about doing history is that these big events, in particular, these big injustices, these big crimes that capitalism has committed, are not in the past, cannot be archived. They have to be kept here with us always. Because in a way they structure the horizon, and they structure a certain understanding of what capitalist society is, what capitalist relations are.

Thank you very much!

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I was concerned with demystifying & rejecting the assumption that capitalism was a kind of evolution out of economic structures that had developed in the middle ages, and showing that capitalism was a counter-revolution, that capitalism was the response to a whole set of social movements of struggle....It gave me an insight into the struggle that women had been waging against feudal power...and why the development of capitalism had to start with this massive attack on women.