

# Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies

---

Volume 3  
Issue 1 *Water and Women in Past, Present and  
Future*

Article 13

---

6-1-2006

## Review of Silvia Federici Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation (2005, Autonomedia, NYC)

Ann Fergusun  
*University of Massachusetts - Amherst*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/wagadu>



Part of the [History of Gender Commons](#), [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Fergusun, Ann (2006) "Review of Silvia Federici Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation (2005, Autonomedia, NYC)," *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 13.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/wagadu/vol3/iss1/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Cortland. It has been accepted for inclusion in Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Cortland. For more information, please contact [DigitalCommonsSubmissions@cortland.edu](mailto:DigitalCommonsSubmissions@cortland.edu).

## Review of *Silvia Federici Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2005, Autonomedia, NYC)

By Ann Ferguson, UMass/Amherst Philosophy and Women's Studies

One of Sylvia Federici's main projects in this important and fascinating new book is to argue that "women" is a legitimate analytic category of analysis, in spite of differences between women of race, class, sexuality, and nationality. Her approach to demonstrating this is a Marxist-feminist one. She presents a historical analysis of changes in the relation of women's work to the economy, the development of the bourgeois intellectual ideology of masculinity and femininity, and the alliance between the Catholic church and nation states in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries to repress women's autonomy and sexuality as a way to consolidate control over the working classes in Europe. For Federici, gender and femininity are not purely a "cultural reality, but a specification of class relations"(14); and the sexual division of labor that controls women's reproductive labor must be manipulated by the new ruling classes as a precondition for the production of surplus value as they develop capitalist relations of private property and the split between commodity production in the market and production for use in the household.

Federici argues that many of the specific features of the transition to capitalism (such as the witch hunts, and the new Enlightenment Cartesian model of the mind/body relation and the body as machine) can be explained as part of the re-organization and disciplining of women's reproductive labor and peasants' productive labor. Unlike more radical feminist analyses of the witch hunts (cf. Dworkin 1974, Daly 1979), who see the extreme terrorism against women that were the witch hunts as due to a more timeless tendency of patriarchy as a universal institution to repress any autonomy or independence in women, Federici argues that they were a specific strategy developed by the Catholic Church, and supported by nation states, to maintain Church control in a time of change, to challenge peasant revolts against the enclosures of the commons, and to control women's reproductive power so as to ensure sufficient labor power would be produced for the future capitalist labor force.

According to Federici, the witch hunts developed in the aftermath of successful peasant revolts of the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> century against enclosures of the commons which suggested the possibility of a more anarchistic and cooperative system of communal production managed by peasants. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, there was the drastic demographic crisis caused by the Black Death decimation of the European population which threatened the supply of labor. The dispossession of many serfs of land and the consequent movement to the cities had left many women as single mothers, and yet economically independent of men, which threatened male control. Federici argues that

the Church, landed gentry and merchant classes seized on the witch hunts as the way to promote their various projects: controlling so-called “heresies” that supported more egalitarian roles for women in religion, limiting women’s control over reproduction and independent sexuality by prohibiting abortions and targeting women as the sources of non-procreative, “lewd” sexuality, stigmatizing women leaders of peasant revolts and alternative health practices so as to divide the working classes and weaken their resistance to land privatization and capitalist exploitation, and re-framing the ideology of the family to normalize the ideal relation for women as in the non-paid work of childbearing and childrearing.

An impressive aspect of Federici’s argument is the convincing way she argues that the classic Marxist story of the transition to capitalism needs to be corrected. Instead of the overemphasis often placed on contradictions within the economic system of feudalism that led to its overthrow by capitalism, we should emphasize the key role of repressive force in the transition. It was state and church-instituted violence, and not economic changes, that were key in repressing peasant rights and privatizing the commons, in wresting control of their bodies and reproduction from women, and in imperialist acquisition of new territories, subjects, and slaves. Central to this process was the ideological demonization of these subjugated populations to justify racist repression and exploitation of their labor. Witch hunts were used to terrorize independent women and rebellious colonial and slave subjects. Both groups were defined as more in thrall to their irrational bodies than dominant class and race men. Systems of legal and economic sexism (women relegated to downgraded, “nonproductive” domestic labor and productive motherhood) and racialization (European white men defined as citizens with full legal rights while indigenous and slave populations were not) created state authority thought to be justified in imposing imperialist and slavery regimes on backwards populations for their own good. Federici argues that the development of such ideological regimes where state and religious institutional forces colluded to create second class and non-citizens were the dark counterpart to Enlightenment ideas of citizen rights to freedom, democracy and self-determination. Further, she argues, these repressive developments and ideologies were necessary conditions for the growth of capitalism as an economic system in Europe.

In the context of her historical arguments for the systematic use of repression in witch hunts as a feature of the new bourgeois control of sexuality, she critiques Michel Foucault’s analysis of the birth of this new regime of sexual control (Foucault 1978). She argues that his theory of the development of a new kind of power, which he calls “disciplinary power”, is too idealist in emphasizing the imposition of new body disciplines by the use of discourses of sexuality by sexologists, parents, doctors, agents of the state, and those targeted by the discourses in internalized self-discipline. Foucault ignores the way that bourgeois control of women’s sexuality involved explicit force and terrorism through the witch hunts, land dispossession, and other repressive tactics. Indeed Foucault ignores questions about male domination and female sexuality altogether in discussing the transition to capitalism, making no mention of the witch hunts. He

seems completely uninterested in repressive aspects of the control of women's sexuality such as rape, battery, and harmful beauty fashions as body techniques of control which discipline women. Further, Federici argues that Foucault is too idealist in attributing the imposition of bourgeois sexuality to a vague Power distributed through micro-powers that replaces repressive, sovereign, or judicial power. Instead disciplinary power, or individual self-disciplining through discourses and body practices, requires and relies on a prior repressive power to motivate those targeted to obey.

While Federici's points against Foucault are well taken, they are not particularly deep criticisms against such a notoriously slippery thinker. While there are passages in *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1* that suggest that he thinks disciplinary power has replaced repressive sovereign or judicial, power; other places suggest that he wants simply to focus on this new type of power, not to eliminate the importance of repressive power altogether. And while Foucault can certainly be critiqued from a feminist perspective for having left a serious consideration of gender power out of his history of sexuality, there are Foucauldian feminist historians who are attempting to add such a history of gender power in sexuality (cf. Scott 1996; Canning 1999).

Federici has certainly made a compelling argument that challenges the standard Marxist reading of the transition from feudalism to capitalism as due to the weakening of the former system because of its internal conflicts and the ability of capitalism to organize the productive forces available in a more efficient way than in the old system. Rather, Federici calls attention to the continued use of repressive and brutal force in the process of primitive accumulation that defeated peasant revolts which were successfully experimenting with alternative cooperative modes of production. She also highlights the women's health and reproductive practices, including birth control and abortion, that were undermining the power of the Catholic Church to control women's sexuality. In some ways, the idea of magic and the power of the devil to be used by women witches was a throwback to a medieval Christian world view incompatible with the new mechanistic world view of bourgeois science. But Federici argues that the witch hunt was a "transitional phenomenon", a sort of **ideological bricolage** that evolved under the pressure of the task it had to accomplish (203), viz. a way of "going back" for capitalism that established the conditions for capitalist accumulation. In this, she contrasts her claim with that of Carolyn Merchant (1980) that the rise of the modern scientific method was the cause of the witch hunt. Merchant argues that modern science comes to see the exploitation of nature as progress, and also see women and the belief in magic associated with witch rituals as disorderly parts of nature that have to be subdued.

Unlike Merchant's view, which would seem to imply that once capitalist science is dominant, repression of women can disappear since belief in magic will disappear, Federici gives us a chilling application of her theory that capitalism must always operate by repressive tactics. She argues that in contemporary globalization, witch hunts are again coming to the fore. Such an occurrence seems to suggest that capitalism is never able to get through the stage of primitive capitalist accumulation in order to get to a

---

more rational, less violent stage of pure capitalist market exploitation. Rather, there are always conflicts between classes and class fractions which develop which facilitate the use of scapegoats and the Othering of some individuals and groups and the consequent use of repressive violence as psychological responses to the system and as mechanisms that have the effect of “divide and conquer” on those subjugated.

There are, however, several problems with Federici’s account. One of them concerns feminist politics and the Marxist feminist unitary theory of the connection between class exploitation, sexism and racism that she presents. A tri- or multi-systems socialist-feminist analysis of the sort that Heidi Hartmann (1981) or I (1991) give of the connection between these systems of power would take the same historical facts that Federici uses to explain the witch hunts, the changes in women’s control over their sexuality and the exclusion of women from well-paying wage labor, typed as men’s jobs, and come to a different conclusion. I would argue that these three systems of power are always in uneasy relation to each other, with periodic crises that require negotiation between dominant groups that either diminish or augment the power of groups exploited or dominated in the subsequent reorganization. Sometimes, indeed, some powers are gained by oppressed groups while others are lost. For example, Federici argues that the so-called “querelle des femmes” which arose in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe featured a transition to a new way of viewing the relation between men and women in which women were portrayed as naturally more domestic, submissive and less able to use rationality, hence women lost power in this new gender ideology. She sees this as the effect of the development of a new Cartesian model of the mind and body as separate and the body as a machine which must be dominated by reason in order to be productive. Since women are associated more with the non-rational body than men, they and their work are assumed to be less rational, less productive and more in need of discipline by men.

But such a reading of the “querelle des femmes”, more accurately, the “woman question” misses the debate: that Cartesianism precisely opens the door for a challenge to the ancient and medieval Greek and European world view of women as inferior to men because of their reproductive, more animal-like functions. If women as souls and minds are as distinct from their bodies as are men, then as human souls and minds they should have the same natural and political rights as men. Such inconsistencies in bourgeois ideology provided an opening for feminist thinkers like Wollstonecraft (1797), Mill (1970), Goldman (1969) and Pateman (1988) to challenge not only the lack of available education for women, but also their lack of citizen rights and the inequalities of patriarchal marriage arrangements. Such thinking, along with the possibility of economic independence for women with the rise of capitalism, forced a change from father patriarchy, where marriages were arranged, to the idea of marriage for love, as a voluntary contract, and critiques of unequal marriages. Although patriarchy was not thereby eliminated, the negotiation between patriarchal privileges and capitalist practices became important in ensuring what kinds of freedoms and constraints would be placed on women in subsequent social formations.

We can give a similar re-reading of the way that members of the male working class organized to petition owners not to employ women in their trades. Federici notes that there were campaigns of craft workers to exclude female workers from their work shops, starting in late 15<sup>th</sup> c (95). There was also a practice called the “patriarchy of the wage”, where when families worked together, that women’s wages were paid to their husband’s so not in women’s control. Although Federici does acknowledge that both of these involved male working class members’ desire to maintain gender control over women, she argues that the exclusion campaign was only successful because it dovetailed with capitalist desire to redefine reproductive work of women as unpaid and in home. Presumably also, she would attribute a similar function to the patriarchy of the wage practices. But surely, there is a non-reductive way to read these phenomena as well: not simply an irrational caving by male workers to an ideology which benefits the capitalists, but as a desperate attempt to preserve male power that is being undermined with the rise of capitalism (cf. Hartmann 1981). If so, we have evidence of two systems of power that come into conflict, and must be re-adjusted to achieve a new stability, rather than the functionalist approach that Federici gives.

The point at issue here has political consequences. If the socialist-feminist reading of the systems of power at issue is correct, a simple “unite and fight” political strategy of the sort suggested by Federici will not work, because equalizing power in this complicated combination of systems will require autonomous social movements of those oppressed, including people of color who are the heirs of the racist imperialism Federici sees as a bi-product of primitive capitalist accumulation. Only after this can we consider coalitions to fight the beast together!!

Perhaps the most fascinating analysis in the book comes in chapter 3, entitled “The Great Caliban: the struggle against the Rebel Body”. In this chapter Federici claims that the new conditions of capitalist production forced the bourgeois to reframe the relation between Reason, Passion and the Body prevalent in the ancient and medieval world so as to find new ways to increase the productive power of bodies. Bodies, as work machines, are seen as the primary source of wealth rather than land or military power, since as the source of labor power (human capital), they are presumed infinitely exploitable. Thus, philosophers and scientists are set the task of learn how to manipulate this bodily power and reconceive its relation to the will, mind, and soul. The body is no longer conceived merely as a negative or sinful force, as it was in the Middle Ages, but a possible positive productive force.

With this focus, Federici reads the debate between Descartes and Hobbes on materialism vs. dualism as different strategies to deal with the relation of mind and body that have consequences for capitalist disciplining of worker bodies. Descartes allows for the possibility of **self-management and self-mastery** of one’s body by mind and will, and to emphasize this makes mind and body metaphysically distinct. Hobbes, on the other hand, conceives of body and mind as one substance as united in a materialist

striving for self interest that can then be controlled by an absolute sovereign who could manipulate the fear and self interest of his subjects. Federici argues that the Cartesian philosophy won out as a bourgeois strategy of state power: sovereigns could in reality never pull off absolute power, but if citizens are seen as capable of self-discipline to obey the “contract” between themselves and state authorities, all that is required is their education into bourgeois morality. Of course this perspective also leaves open potential rebellion against a state thought to be unjust, as in the English, American, and French Revolutions, but at least in the meantime the focus on work discipline and individual responsibility is meant to replace the belief in magic and occult powers outside individual control (the “evil eye”, “the stars”, etc.) which made bodies much less productive than required for a capitalist work force.

Federici’s chapter on the great witch hunt in Europe takes a Marxist functionalist point of view that this was a deliberate campaign, amounting to a war against women to wrest control of their reproductive powers and reduce their possibilities of resistance to capitalist development, in order to use reproduction as a way of augmenting labor power. Another functionalist explanation is possible, that the Catholic Church used the witch hunts to consolidate its power against the various heresies which were more gender egalitarian. We are really never given sufficient reason to reject this alternative account. For example, the Cathar heresy had challenged the Catholic Church’s negative view of women, and had devalued marriage and even procreation which were seen as an entrapment of the soul. If we see the Catholic Church as an institutionalized patriarchy as does Andrea Dworkin in her analysis of witch hunts in *Womanhating* (Dworkin 1974), then a multi-system socialist-feminist analysis would resist the Federici’s reductivist tendency to see the functional motor of the witch hunts as capitalist-inspired, and would instead see it as more multi-causal in origin.

Another question about her explanation concerns the role of irrational factors in this war of terror on women. An alternative explanation to Federici’s sees the witch hunts as like epidemics, as social panics of fear in which vulnerable members of the population are made scapegoats and “othered” to provide the explanation of bad or harmful events or occurrences. While Federici does not deny that such a social process may occur, she wants to argue that this irrational response can be used in the interest of powerful groups. She cites Taussig (Taussig 1980; cf. Federici:170), who argues that Devil beliefs arise in those times when one mode of production is changing into another. Those harmed by these changes look for a scapegoat to blame, and the state and ruling class use this opportunity to use women as scapegoats in order to challenge those previously accepted practices (e.g. termination of unwanted births, magic and ritual healing ceremonies propitiating the spirit world) that they now want to challenge.

This combination explanation of irrational and rational factors is an intriguing one and can be used to explain the role the subconscious irrational factors at play even today in the US foreign and domestic policy, which uses vaguely defined “terrorists” as the enemy to justify wars waged for other motives. However, it is still unclear how the

---

functional explanation goes together with the “irrational Othering” explanation. Do we have to suppose that one or more sets of actors, the ruling group(s), whether thought of as the patriarchs, the wealthy, or capitalists, or state and church authorities, are more capable of a rational pursuit of their own interests than the masses, who are generally manipulable by the logic of irrational Othering? Or, are these irrational factors always at work, even in defining what people, including the ruling groups, think of as their own self interest?

Assuming that even church patriarchs and capitalists are governed by irrational factors in their definition of their self interests implies that the straightforward Marxian logic of capitalist accumulation that Federici posits is too simplistic. We can no longer assume that this capitalist rational logic takes over at a certain point in history, thus rendering all other means of preserving and acquiring social power anachronistic, as do Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*. Federici herself points out that in this present period of capital accumulation known as globalization, witch hunts are again coming to the fore in parts of Africa and Latin America. In which case her explanation that witch hunts were a kind of “ideological bricolage” in the transition to capitalism from the medieval world is no longer helpful, since instead it appears that capitalism always needs techniques of terror to continue its so-called “primitive accumulation”, which is never complete. Further, this time the terror campaigns are not due to manipulation by dominant churches or collusion of capitalist powers, but, often, fundamentalist breakaways from the mainstream religions, such as fundamentalist Christians or Islamists, and seem to manifest that the irrational Othering process noted earlier are returning again.

Given this more complicated model of the interaction of rational and irrational human motives in Othering campaigns, there are plausible alternative explanations to those Federici gives for bourgeois sexuality and racialization. She points out that sexuality becomes more regimented in Europe in the modern period. Unlike in Chaucer’s day, when bawdy sexuality was celebrated for both men and women, sex between young and old, and between different classes, now becomes suspect. A negative connection is made between the prostitute and the witch, in the capitalist context in which prostitution is a growing social institution. Federici argues that this is due to the fact that both prostitutes and witches were seen to engage in sexual crimes, particularly that of non-productive sexuality, and argues that the rising bourgeois class had to condemn such practices, as well as those of homosexuality, because of the logic of capitalist reproduction, which needed to channel sexuality into the production of legitimate children to be either workers or owners, depending on their class of origin. She also argues that the sexual fears, taboos, and anxieties of the European (male) imperialists in the colonized New World stigmatized the sexuality of the indigenous, African slaves, and women, leading to the second class or non-citizenship of these populations, since they were banned from the political social contract implicit in the capitalist wage (200).

However, all the facts that Federici cites above can support the alternative explanations on the one hand, of Foucault on bourgeois sexuality (1978), and of Charles Mills on what he calls “the racial contract” (Mills 1997). Foucault argues that the rising bourgeois class in Europe came to define for itself a new concept of healthy sexuality that contrasted both with the aristocracy, seen as decadent, and the working class, seen as undisciplined. With its creation of the micro-power sites of medicine, the army, criminal justice system and schools and their attendant sciences of sexology, psychiatry, criminology, and pedagogy, it defined its own self-interests in obtaining a self-consciously interrogated sexual health that would justify its right to social dominance over the other more decadent and undisciplined classes and races. Similarly, Mills argues that European imperialists created a racialized social contract of government and economy with conquering armies imposing reservations and marginalized spaces on indigenous peoples, and subsequent economies which exploited both former indigenous land and indigenous and slave work forces. This non- and later second class citizenry continues to be rationalized by an epistemic blindness that sees such status as due to the inadequacies of these populations, and even to be “for their own good”. This dehumanization was both rational and irrational from the point of view of the white imperialists and slave owners: rational in that it promoted their continuing economic exploitation and political power over these groups, and irrational in that it was often overkill. Indigenous were slaughtered in great numbers through excessive cruelty so that they could not be as efficiently exploited, and the system of slavery retarded the faster development of a market capitalist system with less need to give the producers an adequate standard of living. The horror that Christian Europeans felt for Mayan and Inca human sacrifices did not identify these practices as themselves the effect of imperialism by these indigenous groups over other more peaceful natives such as the Zapatecs and Mixtecs, but as a general fault of indigenous “savage” cultures. Similarly, those Native American tribes, such as the Iroquois, whose women were producers of corn and not merely relegated to domestic work as were settler women, were thought to be involved in a primitive “backward” mode of production. This production was thought inferior and due to be overcome by the more “civilized” and superior patriarchal mode of production practiced by the Europeans, who saw their relegation of middle and upper class women to domestic work as a sign of “progress”, not female oppression. These non-rational rejections of alien cultural differences produced a sexual and racial Othering process in which the colonists defined their economic and political self-interests to require eradication of native culture. It thus blinded them to the possibility of learning from indigenous culture, and incorporating aspects which could have been more efficient, such as a less rigid sexual division of labor.

In spite of these differences in our explanatory analytic of the logic of racist imperialism, I agree with Federici’s important claim that in the New World witch hunting was a deliberate strategy used to instill terror, destroy collective resistance, silence entire communities and turn them against each other. Whether we see racist Othering processes as the prime movers or as the necessary rationalizations of imperialist domination, Federici is right to hold that they are a “response inherent to the logic of colonization that

inevitably must dehumanize and fear those it wants to enslave” (222). And she is also right to point out that indigenous men were less likely to be divided from their women accused of witchcraft by the Spanish colonists, unlike what happened in most of Europe during the witchcraft strategy against peasant women leaders of the resistance to the enclosures and to Catholic Church domination.

Whatever side one takes on the theoretical controversies I have raised here, Silvia Federici’s book is a must read, for its brilliant historiography and marshalling of facts about the material, ideological and social changes brought to Europe, and later the New World, by capitalist and imperialist development, and the way that the phenomenon of the witch trials can be shown to figure prominently as a strategy of repression, not only against women, but against the peasant and indigenous workers against whose resistance to such development the strategy was importantly addressed. I am happy to recommend this book highly as one of the most exciting book of theoretical history and philosophy I have read in recent years.

#### References for Federici Review

- Canning, Kathleen 1999. “Feminist History After the Linguistic Turn”, in Sharlene Hesse-Biber, Christina Gilmartin and Robin Lydenberg, eds. *Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology*. 1999, Oxford University Press.
- Daly, Mary 1978. *Gyn/Ecology: The Meta-Ethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston: Beacon.
- Dworkin, Andrea 1974. *Womanhating*. New York: Dutton.
- Ferguson, Ann 1991. *Sexual Democracy: Women, Oppression, and Revolution*. New York: Pandora/Unwin & Hyman.
- Foucault, 1978. *A History of Sexuality, v. 1*. tr. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon.
- Goldman, Emma 1972. “Marriage and Love”, in Alix Kates Shulman, ed. *Red Emma Speaks: Selected Writings & Speeches by Emma Goldman*. New York: Vintage/Random House.
- Hartmann, Heidi 1981. “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism”, in Lydia Sargent, ed. *Women and Revolution*. Boston: South End Press.
- Merchant, Carolyn 1980. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: Harper and Row.

Mill, John Stuart 1970. *The Subjection of Women*. Introduction by Wendell Robert Carr. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Mills, Charles, 1997. *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.  
Pateman (1988)

Pateman, Carole 1988. *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Scott, Joan W. 1996. 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', in Joan Scott, ed. *Feminism and History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Taussig, Michael 1980. *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.

Wollstonecraft, Mary 1967. *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. New York: Norton.