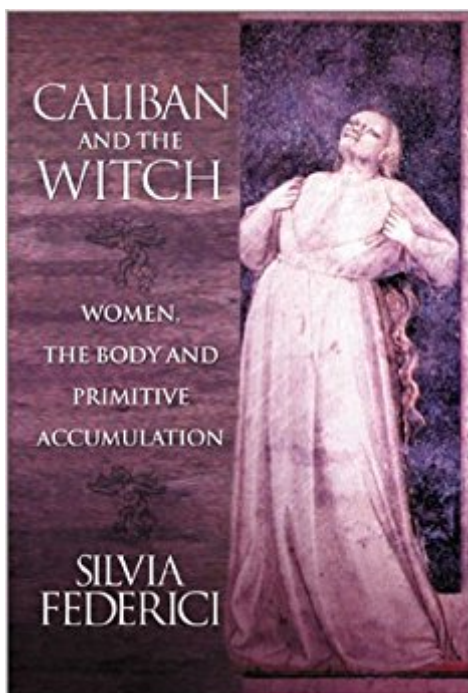


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Caliban And The Witch: Women, The Body And Primitive Accumulation



Synopsis

Literary Nonfiction. CALIBAN AND THE WITCH is a history of the body in the transition to capitalism. Moving from the peasant revolts of the late Middle Ages to the witch-hunts and the rise of mechanical philosophy, Federici investigates the capitalist rationalization of social reproduction. She shows how the battle against the rebel body and the conflict between body and mind are essential conditions for the development of labor power and self-ownership, two central principles of modern social organization."It is both a passionate work of memory recovered and a hammer of humanity's agenda."âPeter Linebaugh, author of The London Hanged

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Customer Reviews

Federici's work on feminism goes back to the 1970s when she felt neither the Radical Feminists nor the Social Feminists provided a satisfactory explanation of the roots of the exploitation of women. In this book she explores the transition from feudalism to capitalism and its affect on women. The title draws on Shakespeare's The Tempest with Caliban representing the anti-colonial rebel and the Witch representing female heretics, healers, disobedient wives, women who dared to live alone, and those who inspired slaves to revolt. Compare that model of strong women to the new model of femininity which emerged at the end of the 17th Century (after centuries of state terrorism): ideal wife, passive, obedient, thrifty, chaste. Federici investigates the 300 years of witch hunts of the Middle Ages, the role of which she sees to create out of the female body workers for the burgeoning capitalist economy. She tells the horrific story of the many ways

that the power of women was destroyed culminating in the massacre and cruel torture of hundreds of thousands of women. The witch hunt was a turning point in women's lives. No doubt the psyche of every woman is affected still by so many of the strongest of us being so treated. Yet the witch hunt is one of the most understudied phenomena in European history.

Silvia Federici's book "Caliban and the Witch" demonstrates the absolute necessity of women's studies for a thorough and scientific understanding of history. Focusing on the role of women and the body in the process by Marx and Adam Smith described as "original accumulation", i.e. the violent expropriation of the feudal commons in the movement towards a capitalist society, Federici demonstrates that a true war against women was an important part of the ruling class' strategy. The book assesses various aspects of this development, including witchcraft and the witch-hunts, the "Christianization" (or rather Catholization) of the North and South American native civilizations, the role of philosophical mechanism and the developers of the scientific method (Bacon, Descartes, Newton, Hobbes, etc.), and the early slave trade. In each case Federici masterfully shows how this development came to be, what role it played in the process of 'original accumulation', and why it was favored temporarily by the ruling class. She also gives very strong evidence that things like fear of witchcraft, patriarchy, racism etc., often seen as the inevitable and 'natural' results of ignorance and superstition in those societies, were in reality forced onto the common people as part of a top-down campaign to destroy the backbone of the feudal communities. What is an additional interesting contribution of this book is Federici's evidence that there was not only widespread peasant resistance against the process of enclosure, capitalization and expropriation, but more particularly that women often played a very major role in these resistance movements, especially after the German Peasant War ended in a massacre. Many of the women who would later be burned and persecuted as witches were likely survivors of these resistance movements and therefore both had strong connections with local farming communities and resentment against authority, a dangerous combination for the ruling classes. To me it was also remarkable new information to learn about how common female wage-labor in the cities was in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, as well as the degree of acceptance of sexuality and magic. Of course we should not in any way try to paint too rosy a picture of the late feudal era, which everyone knows had enough terror and tyranny of its own, but Federici shows that even then there was a strong current of people resisting both (proto-)capitalism and its predecessor. In her historical panorama, Federici addresses many other writers on women and the body and their subjugation, in particular the feminists, Marx, Foucault and such people as Le Roy Ladurie and Carlo Ginzburg. In my view

Federici overstates her case against Marx a bit; she is correct that the role of the subjugation of women in particular was not much addressed by him, but it certainly was by Engels, and I also think that the insights she shows in this work would have been able to count on Marx' full assent. She also seems to miss the fact that "primitive accumulation" is a mistranslation of Marx' term, so that accusations of Marx missing the fact that such expropriatory violence takes place as part of capitalism even today miss the mark. Stronger is her case against Foucault, where she can show that Foucault not only completely ignores the importance of the witch-hunts and the Plague as turning points for feudal and post-feudal society, but that he also locates his famous instrumentalist subjugation of the body far too late in history (Foucault places it at the late 18th century, Federici rather in the 16th). In any case the scope of her knowledge of writers on these subjects is great, and the way in which she gives a context to the ideas of Descartes and other mechanists on "L'Homme Machine" (the term is 18th C.) is striking. Overall, this is an absolute must-read for anyone interested in history, original accumulation and women's studies.

This book showed how the working classes were divided along gender lines as industrial capitalism took over. It also shows the terror campaigns that were conducted to shock the lower classes into accepting the loss of the commons. This book is one of the most educational I've read, but it does suffer from more academic jargon than a non-academic may be used to. A dictionary or google will solve that issue.

This fills in an immense, essential gaps if we are to begin to understand our historical journey from European feudalism through colonization to the totalizing capitalism of today.

This book has a very original point of view about the so called Witch Hunt: reasons were economical more than religious. I surely agree with the writer's view though it must not be forgotten that religion causes to persecution were very strong back then. Of course religion was hiding (like today) the real issue: power. But, as historians, we should be careful not to apply philosophical categories to times they don't belong to. Silvia Federici is anyhow very balanced in her research. This book should be read by all those who are interested in Witches + real history.

This book provides a very clear exposure of the how's and why's of today's disciplinary policy.

DENSE BUT INCREDIBLE READ.

gift, came as advertised

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