

excerpts from

THE ORIGINAL MACHINE

A HISTORY OF WITCHES AND REBELS

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* based on the book *Caliban and the Witch* by Silvia Federici





In 1730, Sally Bassett, an elderly black slave in Bermuda, was burned alive for allegedly poisoning her masters. She was the last woman to be officially executed for witchcraft in an English-speaking country (though unofficial witch-hunts, like unofficial slavery, were far from over). Three hundred years before, the first mass witch-trials in Europe began in Switzerland in 1428, following unrest, uprisings, and civil war. Authorities recorded accusations, and if more than three people denounced someone, that person was arrested and tortured. Seven hundred people were charged, and almost 400 executed. In the following centuries, hundreds of thousands of women would be tried for witchcraft (a charge that included abortion and the use of contraceptives), tortured, and executed. The witch-hunts peaked in the “Iron Century” from 1530 to 1660. This was the same period that saw the rise of capitalism as a social and economic system, the “discovery” of the Americas and genocide of Native Americans, the Enclosures of public land and enactment of the “Bloody Laws” in England, the birth of scientific rationalism, and the slave trade in Africa.

What is the connection between these events? Why were hundreds of thousands of women executed at the same time that Europe’s elite consolidated their power, colonizing and enslaving millions globally?

“ HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF WOMEN COULD NOT HAVE BEEN MASSACRED AND SUBJECTED TO THE CRUELEST TORTURES UNLESS THEY POSED A CHALLENGE TO THE POWER STRUCTURE. ”

The power structures that served the European elite in the witch-hunts were part of a larger project of domination, through which methods of control and exploitation were spread, shared, and refined across continents and generations. The impetus came from a crisis in feudal Europe: the ruling classes were losing their wealth and control of the peasants and their land. At its birth, capitalism desperately needed to concentrate and consolidate wealth. The most valuable form of wealth is people: labor power. One purpose of the witch-hunts was to control women’s ability to bear and raise children, that is, reproduction, which in capitalism is synonymous with the production of workers. The work of reproduction (which includes both giving birth to children who become workers and renewing workers’ ability to keep working every day by providing care, food, clothing, hygiene, etc) is not recognized as a “real job” by capitalist society. Instead, the capitalist society pretends that “women’s work” is a natural resource or a personal service while profiting from it. In order to leverage “women’s work” for free, men and women, and their work, had to be divided.

“ SEXUAL HIERARCHIES ARE ALWAYS AT THE SERVICE OF A PROJECT OF DOMINATION THAT CAN SUSTAIN ITSELF ONLY BY DIVIDING THOSE IT INTENDS TO RULE. ”

In Europe, the peasants' ability to take care of themselves autonomously was destroyed through the enclosure (privatization) of fields, forests, and waters. The harsh laws and reprisals of the ruling classes birthed a class of vagabonds and criminals. The ruling classes needed workers for factories, sailors for ships, and criminals for colonies and plantations, but the bodies of the rebels were "undisciplined." The witch-hunt was an important step in disciplining women's bodies and sexuality. All "non-productive" forms of sexuality (homosexuality, sex between young and old, sex between people of different classes, anal sex, sex from behind, nudity, public sex) and "non-productive" pastimes like games, dancing, and feasting were outlawed. While the ideal worker was supposed to be "temperate, prudent, responsible, proud to possess a watch," the peasants were considered lewd, idle, lazy, fanciful, and lustful. And the witch was the worst of them all.

She was the promiscuous woman, prostitute or adulteress, who enjoyed sex outside of wedlock and procreation. She was the rebel who talked back, argued, swore, and did not cry under torture. She wandered common fields and forests to gather food, medicines, and firewood, and organized parties to secretly dig up the fences and hedges that enclosed lands seized by private interests. She was called to animals and neighbors when they were sick, helped people find lost and stolen things, gave amulets and potions, and forecasted the future. Her magical power undermined the power of authorities and the state and gave confidence to the poor. So while the capitalist society needed women to produce workers, they first needed to break women's power and prestige in their own villages and homes.

“ WITCH-HUNTING WAS AN ATTACK ON WOMEN’S RESISTANCE
TO THE SPREAD OF CAPITALISM AND THE POWER THAT WOMEN
HAD BY VIRTUE OF THEIR SEXUALITY, THEIR CONTROL OVER
REPRODUCTION, AND THEIR ABILITY TO HEAL. ”

The peasants' resistance to capitalist domination was fierce, so the ruling classes escalated the class conflict violently. In England, King Henry VIII hung 72,000 people in under forty years. By 1800, over 200 crimes were punishable by death, including stealing, poaching, and infanticide. Capitalism could only get labor power by violence, so "violence itself [became] the most productive force." The witch-hunt was one of the ruling classes' most violent weapons against the peasants' resistance. It was not spontaneous, and did not start from the people. It required official organization and administration.

The typical procedure was to strip the accused person naked, shave her completely, prick her with long needles all over her body, including her vagina, in search of the devil's mark, which could be any bruise or mole. The accused were often raped. It was investigated whether or not they were virgins. If they didn't confess, their limbs were torn, they were seated on iron chairs under

which fires were lit, their bones were crushed. They were forced to name other witches. The final execution was a public event which all members of the community had to attend, including the children and children of the accused, especially their daughters, who in some cases were whipped in front of the stake on which their mothers were burned. "We must spread terror among some by punishing many," said Jean Bodin, the French statesman, philosopher, and witch-hunter. In some villages, it is recorded that only one or two women were left after the trials.

“ IT WAS IN THE TORTURE CHAMBERS AND ON THE STAKES ON WHICH THE WITCHES PERISHED THAT THE BOURGEOIS IDEALS OF WOMANHOOD AND DOMESTICITY WERE FORGED. ”

With women's control of reproduction criminalized, and the witches' standing in the community undermined, capitalism had the human and social resources it needed to move beyond Europe. Witch-hunting continued in the Americas as a tool to root out resistance movements and terrorize those who tried to maintain their traditional social and spiritual structures. Plantation owners, constantly in fear of uprisings or of being poisoned, used witch-hunts to sow fear and divisions among the enslaved. Today, witch-hunting is on the rise in India and Africa. Thousands of women have been murdered for their property, for speaking out against the power structure, or simply for not complying with social norms.

“ THE CONTINUING EXPULSION OF FARMERS FROM LAND, WAR AND PLUNDER ON A WORLD SCALE, AND THE DEGRADATION OF WOMEN ARE NECESSARY CONDITIONS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF CAPITALISM AT ALL TIMES. ”

This is a history of how a method of control has been perfected. It's a history of the [queer, woman, rebel] body leashed, its powers tamed, quantified, and monetized, mirroring the domination of the land itself. It's also a story about the failure of this system to eradicate the witches, wise women, and rebels. It's about daily resistance to domination, because MAGIC KILLS INDUSTRY, and we are magical to our very bones.

TIMELINE

300 -- The Bacaudae, "Band of Fighters," free peasants and slaves, wander out of the Roman Empire into Gaul (France), form governments, strike coinage, and elect leaders. For two hundred years, Rome struggles to repress them, but they are never completely defeated.

400 - 600 -- serfdom develops in Europe in response to the collapse of Rome's slave system

1110s -- "We can go to the woods and take what we want, take fish from the fish pond, and game from the forests; we'll have our own will in the woods, the waters, and the meadows." -English serf

1177-1350 -- 280 charters conceded in Lorraine in this period, limiting power of the nobility

1179 -- Third Lateran Council condemns homosexuality for the first time, intensifying the Church's attack on non-procreative sex

1200s -- Women are the most numerous among rural immigrants to the cities. The Church decides that only voluntary poverty has merit in God's eyes.

1224 -- Emperor Frederick II decides heresy should be punished with death by fire

1251 -- Pastoreux, "shepherds," burn and pillage the rich in Northern France, demanding betterment of their condition

1252 -- Pope Innocent IV authorizes the use of torture against the heretics

1260 -- The year Flagellants believe the world will end, according to Abbot Joachim da Flora

1300-1500 -- Women in Frankfurt hold positions in at least 200 occupations, including doctor, surgeon, and teacher

1315-1322 -- Great Famine

1323-1328 -- Urban workers and day laborers join and support the peasant revolt in Flanders in a peasant-worker alliance

1335 -- Ghent weavers try to establish a "workers' democracy," but they are defeated by a coalition of the prince, nobility, clergy, and bourgeoisie

1347-1352 -- Black Death wipes out over a third of the population of Europe

1348 -- Canons of Normandy complain they can't find anyone to work their land who doesn't ask for more than what six servants had earned at the beginning of the century

1349 -- England passes the Statute of 1349 setting a cap on wages and penalizing idleness

1350-1450 -- Tax-financed brothels opened in every town and village in Italy and France.

1350-1500 -- Crisis for the ruling class: wages increase by 100%, prices decline by a third, rents decline, the length of the working day decreases

1354 -- France passes an ordinance that those who waste time in taverns, playing dice, or begging, have to work. First offenders are put in prison, second offenders are put in the stocks, third offenders are branded on the forehead

1366 -- Florence authorizes the importation of slaves

1377 -- Cloth workers in Flanders take arms against their employers, are hanged as rebels and burned by the Inquisition as heretics

1378 -- Ghent weavers rebel again, establishing what may be the first “dictatorship of the proletariat”

1381 -- English Peasant Uprising is sparked by attempts to limit the maximum wage.

1382 -- Ghent weavers are finally defeated in battle. 26,000 of them are killed.

-- In Florence, the Ciompi, textile day laborers, seize control of the industry and establish a worker's democracy, declararing a moratorium on workers' debts. A few months later, they are defeated, hung and decapitated.

1387 -- Castile passes an ordinance that allows people to arrest vagabonds and enslave them for one month without wages

Late 1300s -- Peasants collectively refuse to pay rent and render services. Land bondage and serfdom throughout Europe has mostly been replaced by free farmers. Heresy becomes associated with reproductive crimes (“sodomy,” “infanticide,” and abortion). This is a time of severe labor shortage, and the first witch-trials.

1403 -- Florence bans homosexuals from public office and sets up the Office of Decency to root them out; the office busies itself with opening a new public brothel.

1413 -- in Paris, a “worker’s democracy” comes to power

1419-1420 -- Women, heretics, and Jews are first accused of hexerei, “witchcraft,” in trials in Lucerne and Interlaken

1435-1487 -- Twenty-eight treatises on witchcraft written

1453 -- Amiens has 53 brothels

1462-1486 -- The remensas, armed peasant uprisings in Spain

1486 -- Malleus Maleficarum (The Hammer of Witches) published

1493-1517 -- The Bundschuh (Peasant Union) leads four bloody rebellions, demanding the end of the power of the lords.

Late 1400s -- Land privatization takes off in Europe. Population stagnates or declines.

1497 -- Amerigo Vespucci arrives in South America

Early 1500s -- “The peasants are too rich...and do not know what obedience means; they don’t take law into any account, they wish there were no nobles...and they would like to decide what rent we should get for our lands.” -writer on the ruling class’s woes. The “Sabbat” becomes an established theme in witchcraft trials.

1509-1547 -- In the thirty-eight years of his reign, King Henry VIII hangs 72,000 people

1522-1525 -- the Bundschuh rebellions culminate in a war that spreads across four countries. By the end, 100,000 peasants are massacred. Survivors are subject to vicious reprisals.

1524 -- A Chiapanecan priestess leads troops against the Spaniards

1528 -- Colonial Spanish authorities establish that couples cannot be separated, so that women and children must do mine labor with the men

1530-1560 -- Sixty European towns introduce systems of public assistance to promote stability. Town brothels are closed and prostitutes are subjected to severe penalties like banishment and flogging.

1531 -- Anabaptists attempt to set up a "City of God" in Munster, Germany, renaming it New Jerusalem and instituting a communal government based upon sharing. The attempt is crushed violently.

1532 -- The Carolina, Charles V's legal code, declares that witchcraft be punished by death

1536-1543 -- Bishop Zumarraga tries 75 Indian heretics, burning many at the stake, among them political and religious leaders

1545 -- Six thousand vagabonds recorded in Venice alone. Potosi silver mine discovered in Bolivia.

1549 -- Robert Kett, farmer and tanner, leads a rebellion in Norfolk. 16,000 rebels defeat an army and capture Norwich, drafting 29 demands. A second government army attacks, killing 3,500. Kett and his brother are hung outside Norwich.

1550 -- The European working class comes to be called simply "the poor." A debate rages in Valladolid, Spain about whether or not the "Indians" are human beings.

mid-1500s -- Europeans turn much of the Canary Islands into sugar plantations. The Taki Onqoy resistance movement rises in Peru and the Andes.

1556 -- A royal edict in France requires women to register every pregnancy and sentences to death those whose infants are stillborn if the birth is hidden

1562 -- Diego de Landa rounds up 4,500 people in the Yucatan, charges them for practicing human sacrifice, and tortures them publicly.

1565 -- A warehouse in Antwerp collapses under the weight of grain stored in it. Many starve in the streets.

-- Queen Elizabeth I grants the College of Physicians the right to claim the bodies of felons.

1570s -- 300-400 "rogues" (vagabonds, beggars, or criminals) are hanged annually in England

1571 -- Anne Hendricks executed for witchcraft in Amsterdam

1579 -- Elizabeth Stile, Mother Devell, Mother Margaret, and Mother Dutton, all poor widows, are executed at Windsor

1580 -- Englishman Francis Hitchcock proposes that the poor be drafted into the Navy. The proposal is defeated by the objection that the poor might steal the ships and become pirates

1580-1630 -- The Great Witch-Hunt peaks

1585 -- Rebels in Naples mutilate the body of a magistrate responsible for the rising cost of bread, offering pieces of his flesh for sale.

-- Margaret Harkett is hanged at Tyburn for being a witch

1590-1650 -- An estimated 4,500 women are executed in Scotland

1593-1595 -- In France, the Croquants revolt against tithes, excessive taxation, and the high price of bread.

1594 -- Gostanza, professional healer, is tried for witchcraft in San Miniato, Italy

1600 -- In the Americas, one third of communal indigenous land is held by the Spaniards under the encomienda system. In Mexico, the population is now 2.5 million, from 11 million less than a century before. In Spain, wages have lost 30% of their value in the same period of time. All states where witch-hunts are taking place are also actively promoting population growth.

Early 1600s -- First male midwives appear, obstetrics comes under state control

1603 -- The Synod of Aberdeen orders Presbyterian ministers to question their parishioners about suspected witches.

1604 -- Parliament passes an act introducing the death penalty for anyone who “uses spirits and magic” regardless of whether or not people or things are harmed.

1605 -- England passes a law declaring that if women trespass or riot, their husbands will pay the cost, whether the trespass is committed with their permission or not.

1607 -- Captain Dorothy leads 37 women against coal miners working on what the women claim are their village commons

1608 -- Forty women tear up the fences and hedges of enclosures in Waddingham. In Southampton a group of women board and seize a ship being loaded with grain for export.

-- Francesco Maria Guazzo publishes the Compendium Maleficarum, portraying witches as cannibals

1609 -- Fifteen women in Dunchurch dig up hedges and level fences by night

-- Basque fishermen rescue the women of their town before they can be burned.

1620-1640 -- The “General Crisis” peaks in Europe and the colonies. Markets shrink, trade stops, unemployment spreads. The ruling classes become obsessed with population growth. Witch-trials escalate in Germany.

1624 -- Women destroy an enclosure, go to prison, enjoy tobacco and ale after.

1629 -- At Maldon over a hundred women and children board ships loaded with grain to stop them from leaving. They are led by Captain Ann Carter, later hanged.

1640 -- By this time, more than 17,000 tons of gold have been imported to Europe from Brazil. Racial hierarchy is formalized in the Spanish colonies, separating indigenous, mestizo, mulatto, and white people.

1645 -- Women in Montpellier take to the streets to protest starvation conditions

mid-1600s -- Women receive only one third the pay men receive. Games of chance, nudity, drinking, swearing, and public baths are outlawed in England and France. Portuguese ships return from Africa with the first slaves. All European governments begin to impose severe penalties for contraception, abortion, and infanticide. Thousands of convicts are shipped from Britain to the Caribbean colonies, where they are soon discovered plotting revolt with African slaves. The Spaniards respond to the anti-colonial Taki Onqoy movement in Peru by destroying idols and instigating witch-hunts.

1652 -- Women lead the Cordoba uprising, driven by starvation.

1660s -- Maryland and Virginia pass laws that forbid marriage and sex between blacks and whites. Children resulting from these unions are to be slaves for life.

1664 -- Descartes publishes his Treatise of Man, an anatomical handbook

1675-1676 -- African slaves and British indentured servants join together in Virginia to overthrow their masters in Bacon's Rebellion.

End of the 1600s -- A new feminine ideal emerges: chaste, passive, obedient, thrifty, quiet, busy. Witch-hunts wind down in Europe. Midwives are under state control. In the New World, planters began to limit the use of indentured servants and prisoners from Europe, separating them from African slaves.

1704 -- Pierre Bayle writes, “[In many places in Europe] there is no village or hamlet, no matter how small, where someone is not considered a witch.”

1730 -- Sarah Bassett, a black slave, is executed in Bermuda for being a witch

1807 -- The slave trade is abolished. “Slave breeding” policy adopted in the colonies.

1840s -- Wave of witch-burnings in Western India

1871 -- Woman Communards are accused of conspiring to burn down Paris.

1994 -- Seventy witches are burned in Northern Transvaal, Africa.

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