Caliban and the Witch: A critical analysis

The following is a translation of a collaborative critique of *Caliban and the Witch*, written by Yann Kindo and Christophe Darmangeat in December 2017, and published in two separate essays on their respective blogs: La Faucille et le Labo, and La Hutte des Classes. The first, for the most part, deals with the historical facts themselves and the method with which S. Federici deals with them (badly); the second tries to discuss the main theoretical understandings developed in the book. The foreward, by Alain Bihr, was taken from the abridged brochure, available at des éditions Smolny.

Forward

I. History and the facts abused

> Critical analysis of Sylvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* demonstrates her lack of seriousness in dealing with an important issue: why was the last phase (from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century) of the multi-secular transition from feudalism to capitalism accompanied in Western Europe by a deterioration of the situation of women, from the top to the bottom of the social ladder? In the course of their criticism, Yann Kindo and Christophe Darmangeat mention two important elements of an answer, moreover largely linked to each other: on the one hand, the reintroduction of Roman law during the Middle Ages, and, through it, that of the Roman conception of private property, both full (involving both the usus, the fructus and the abusus[1]) and free (transmissible and alienable); and, on the other hand, the triumph of the nuclear family over other family structures (patriarchal family and family-stock)–both elements and conditions of the formation of capitalist relations of production–giving the woman a status of legal minor, excluding her (largely) from the transfer of property and placing it under the tutelage of husband after that of his father.
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> To make this degradation of women one of the main drivers of the final phase of the transformation of feudalism into capitalism is to omit such important aspects of capitalism such as: the effects of the commercial and colonial expansion of Western Europe towards of the Americas, Africa and Asia on its proto-capitalist dynamics; the prodromes[2] of the "agricultural revolution" and those of the industrial revolution in its countryside; the process of enlarging and concentrating the markets; mercantilist policies implemented by states in almost permanent war; the transformation of an 'order structure' into a class structure; the first bourgeois revolutions (in the United States and England); the impact of these cultural revolutions that were the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, etc.
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> *Alain Bihr, February 2018*

Caliban and the Witch is a book published in English in 2004, before being translated into French by Editions Entremonde in 2014; its success has earned it a reissue in 2017. The author, Silvia Federici, is an American academic of Italian origin who, after part of her career in Nigeria, became Professor Emeritus of Social Science at Hofstra University in New York. She is a feminist activist, from a tradition that is generally described as "autonomist," "radical," or even "materialist".

In this book, the most famous she wrote, she develops a thesis that could be summarized as: the episode of the great witch-hunt in Europe must be understood as a moment of primitive capitalist accumulation, which corresponds to a generalized subjugation of

women and which was as indispensable to the development of nascent capitalism as was, for example, the Atlantic Slave Trade.

It is with undisguised curiosity that we decided to start reading a text that deals with a subject of which we are neither specialists. We quickly went from astonishment to astonishment...

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It would obviously be inappropriate to reproach Silvia Federici for wanting to do a historian's job without having the academic training, for many excellent works have been written by people who were not specialists or even did not have any university credentials. On the other hand, whatever the actual or supposed skills of the authors, a history book must not be a storybook: the facts and ideas it contains must be presented with rigor and honesty–all the more so when, as is the case here, the author claims to question the facts on which a consensus within the field has been reached. And there's the rub.

A. Revolutionizing historiography?

One of the topics on which *Caliban* explicitly claims to propose a historiographic revolution is that of witch-hunting, a movement that touched all of Western Europe at the hinge 16th and 17th centuries.

The author's view of the (copious) historiography that precedes it cannot be distinguished either by its indulgence or its sobriety:

> The fact that the victims in Europe were mainly peasants probably explains the indifference of historians to this genocide. An indifference that has come close to complicity, the erasure of the witch hunt from pages of history that helped trivialize their physical elimination at the stake. (...) The kind of misogyny that inspired the approaches scholarship on witch hunting abound. Like Mary Daly reported it as early as 1978, most of the literature on this topic was written "from the executioner's point of view," discrediting the victims of the persecution, the representing as failures (women "dishonored" or frustrated in love) or even perverts taking pleasure in teasing the inquisitors males with their fantasies
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> *Caliban and the Witch, p. 252*

Just that. This view of things clearly has nothing to do with the academic works that we have been able to consult. In support of her categorical judgment on her predecessors, Federici does not mention anything of the works of specialists like the American Levack or the French Muchembled at this point in her presentation; she summons in total two authors of a History of Psychiatry to support her judgement, two authors who happen to not be historians, but psychoanalysts. However, in France, the hunt for witches was studied in 1862 by the most famous historian of that time, the rationalist Jules Michelet; his work, *La Sorcière*, still considered today as an international reference, is precisely written from the point of view of the victim, vis-à-vis whom he constantly shows a strong lyrical empathy. This does not prevent Silvia Federici from claiming that "it is only after the feminist movement that the witch hunt has come out of oblivion where it was relegated," (p. 253), as if this subject had not occupied, besides Michelet, generations of historians. There is no reason to systematically revere the great classics, but the author adopts an attitude towards academic historians that combines a surprising ignorance with a very violent arrogance, as when she attacks by name her eminent Italian colleague Carlo Ginzburg, writing about one of his analyses (very briefly quoted) that "he thus renders the victims responsible for their disastrous fate" (p. 310). Well-known historian, founder and leader of "microhistory", but also a left-wing activist who has used his competency on the subject of witch hunts to shed light on the logic of contemporary trials against Italian far-left activists such as Adriano Sofri, Carlo Ginzburg is, on the face of it, hardly suspect of what Federici accuses him.

The central question of the number of witch-hunt victims illustrates the flippancy with which Federici proceeds. On several occasions in the book, she reports “hundreds of thousands” of executions. However, the highest estimate from a professional historian (Anne Barstow) estimates the number of victims at 100,000, the other specialists (Hutton, Levack, Rowlands, Vissière) setting it unanimously between 40,000 and 60,000. Inflating the numbers by multiplying them by about ten is obviously necessary to build the book’s thesis: “Feminists quickly realized that hundreds of thousands of women could not have been slaughtered and subjected to the most cruel tortures without threatening the structure of power” (p. 254). Later, on the same page, Marxist historians are also accused of having refused to see the reality: “”The magnitude of the massacre should have aroused suspicion, with hundreds of thousands of women being burned, hanged and tortured in less than two centuries. “

But how to justify this freedom taken with the figures currently admitted? Note 11, page 254, the only one to approach the question, asserts that the question is “controversial”. From this controversy, the author retains only the highest estimate, that of Anne Barstow, which she immediately transforms into “several hundreds of thousands” (without any sort of ‘trial’, one could say). In doing so, however, it shows, if it is permissible to speak thus, of a certain restraint: the inflation on this question is a well-established tradition in certain branches of feminism, since in 1893, the suffragette Joslyn Gage was already advancing in her book *Woman, Church, and State* the truly delusional figure of 9 million killed.

To the question of the overall number of executions is added that of the proportion between the sexes. In order for the witch hunt to be assimilated to a war against women, the vast majority of her victims must of course have been female. Throughout his presentation, Federici assumes this hypothesis, without taking the trouble to support it otherwise than by a short development, page 282:

> In the first period, men accounted for up to 40 per cent of the accused, and a smaller number continued to be judged, mainly vagrants, beggars, itinerant workers, gypsies and lower-ranking priests. (...) But the outstanding fact is that over 80% of those tried and executed in Europe in the XVIth and XVIIth century for crimes of witchcraft were women.

What “first period” is referred to, no way to find out. Still, according to historians who have studied the question, the percentage is not quite that given by Federici: “Globally, 70 to 80 percent of those tried for witchcraft in early modern Europe and England were women.” However–and especially:

> There was, however, considerable regional variation in the sex of persecuted individuals. (...) Men were in the majority in Iceland, Normandy, Estonia and Russia; men and women were prosecuted in roughly the same proportions in Finland, Burgundy and the French regions which depended on the Parliament of Paris.
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> *Alison Rowlands, “Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe”, in Brian P. Levack (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America, 2003*

These elements, by themselves, certainly do not invalidate the thesis defended by Federici. But, at the very least, they question her: how to explain that a movement whose deep nature had supposedly been a specific persecution of women has, in certain places, attacked men as much as, if not more so? One would be justified in waiting for the author to examine the question and answer it, by highlighting the factors that could explain these local variations. Lost penalty: Federici traces its path, and failing to refute the elements that could contradict it, she chooses to ignore them (or, we will see, to disguise them).

In general, it is also striking that *Caliban*, contrary to custom, offers almost no reflection on the use of its sources. We are thus surprised by all that Federici knows (or believes she

knows), especially about the popular classes of the so-called modern era (from the 16th century), for which we have very few sources. In reality, her method is to practice a "cherry-picking[3]" according to the needs of her thesis, leaving, when that is not enough, to cheat a little to fill the gaps.

Caliban certainly contains good passages, well supported by specific facts and sources. Generally, they are widely borrowed from other authors and, above all, they do not concern the heart of her thesis, as in pages 45-46, where Federici evokes in a very interesting way the peasant resistances to chores and other obligations imposed by the Lord.

Often, however, it draws definitive conclusions on certain topics without sufficient evidence. Sometimes she seems to be unaware that the absence of proof is not proof of absence, and she draws strong conclusions with a lack of sources! Thus, on page 298, she explains that with the exception of a case of fishermen from the Basque country, despite numerous individual attempts by sons, husbands or fathers to save their loved ones from the stake, we have no narrative of male organization opposing persecution, showing that this propaganda has managed to separate women and men.

But do we have so many stories of women's organization to oppose these same persecutions? And since this does not seem to be the case, since Federici does not mention it, does that mean that women have been "separated" from women?

In the same spirit, page 152:

> I would add that the intensification of the persecution of 'witches' and the new disciplinary methods that the state has adopted during this period to regulate procreation and to break women's control over reproduction can also be related to this crisis. The evidence for this argument is only indirect, and it must be pointed out that other factors have strengthened the determination of the European power structure to more strictly control the reproductive function of women.

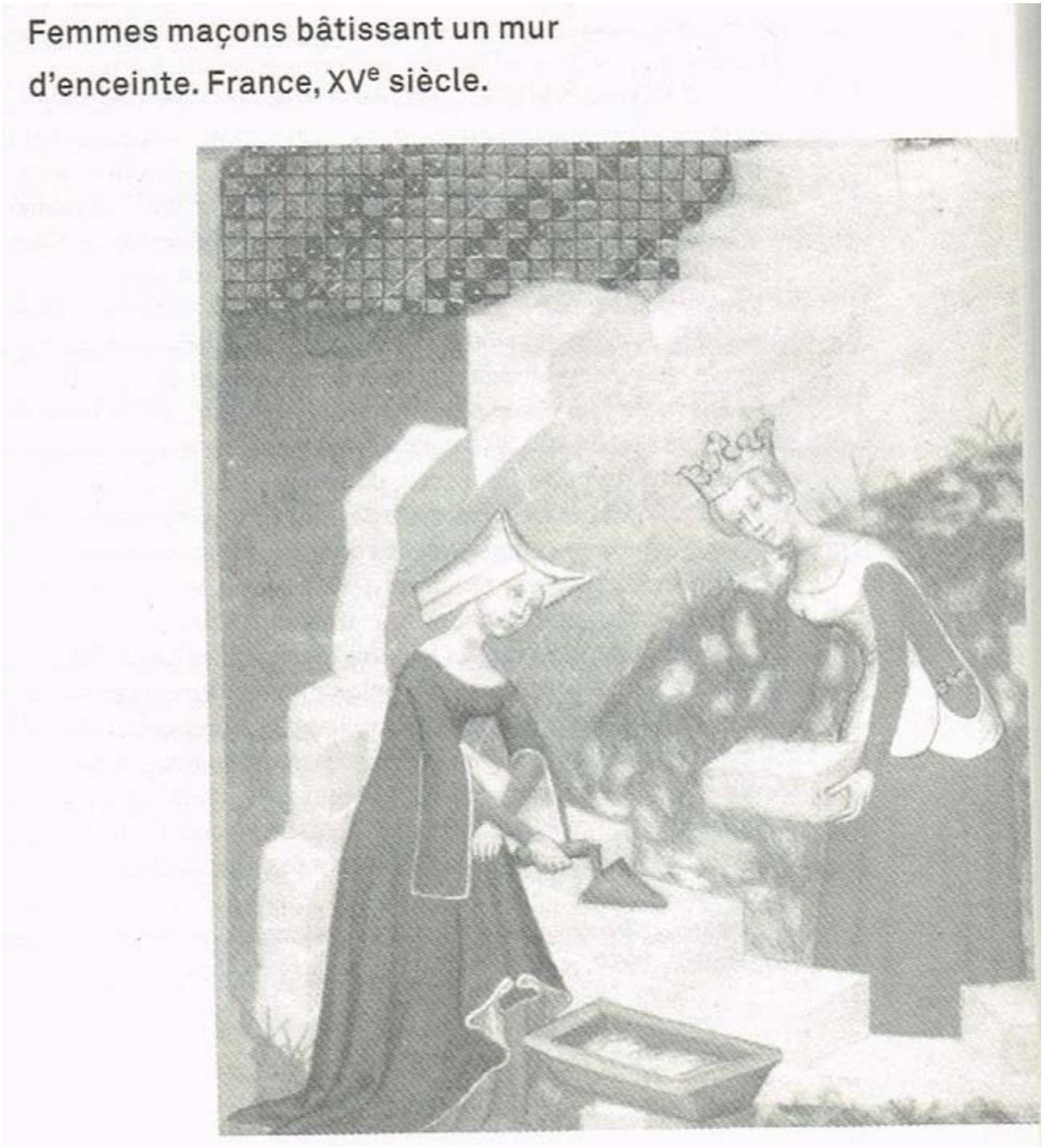
To the direct evidence that nourishes other causes than those she has chosen to favor, the author generally prefers tenuous "indirect proofs" going in her direction:

> Slavery also had an impact on the wages of European workers and their legal status: we cannot talk of coincidence if only with the end of slavery did wages rise sharply in Europe and European workers obtained the right to organize. (p. 185)

Pointing a correlation is not enough to show causality. For this one must still study the relationship from cause to effect. Otherwise, we could also claim that it is not a coincidence that the number of cases of autism identified has increased since the introduction of the MMR vaccine (or since we find organic products in the supermarket; this works as an example as well). Federici sometimes uses a posteriori logical reconstructions of her own making as proof. Very often, the proof that things have happened like this is that, within the book's framework, it would be logical for them to have gone that way. Expressions of the type "one guesses that..." abound thus in the work.

B. The manipulation of iconography

But the main compensating technique used by the author, which sometimes comes down to pure and simple manipulation, remains the use she makes of iconography, particularly rich.[4] Page 35, while she intends to demonstrate the extent of the decline of the status of women in modern times, which results in a more gendered division of labor than previously, the reader is offered an image that represents women masons in the Middle Ages:



Female masons building a wall. 15th century; taken from the french edition

At this moment of its reading, the circumspect reader finds these “masons” of the fifteenth century still very well dressed, and is surprised that one of them even wears a headdress with a royal appearance. In the absence of further details on the provenance of the illustration (a constant throughout the book), the reader then uses the internet to find the original image:

La Cité des dames

It can be seen that Silvia Federici has not only carefully amputated this image of its left side, which is much less in line with her thesis, but above all she has made it say exactly the opposite of what it says. Indeed, it turns out that the illustration is taken from a book by Christine de Pizan entitled *La Cité des Dames*, published in 1405, in which the author develops the idea of a feminist utopia where women, armed with reason, can build a new more egalitarian society between the sexes. In other words, *it is by no means depicting a scene found in real life*: the mason is none other than Christine de Pizan herself, striving to build her city with the help of three allegories crowned: Reason, Righteousness and Justice.[5]

In a section devoted to the obsession of male control and the new power of men over women in modern times, the proof this time is the negative figure of the woman who wears the pants in the house. Thus, p. 169, an illustration–just as little referenced as the others–shows a woman beating her husband, with the caption:

> Just like the struggle to know who wears the pants, the image of the domineering woman challenged the sexual hierarchy. The blows she bore to her husband were one of the favorite targets of social literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

No one will think of challenging it a priori, but if this is an element supposed to show the

major *break* from the attitudes that preceded it that occurred at the time, it is embarrassing that a book like that of Robert Delort, *La vie au Moyen Age*[6], already report the same phenomenon for a much earlier period, a period that was supposed to work differently:

> It has been remarked, at least in the literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, that the number of husbands reprimanded, beaten, tyrannized–and cuckolded–by their wife-ogress, strong in mouth and sole patroness at home, is far superior to that of women "corrected" by their husbands.

Later, on page 181, the growing contempt for women in the modern age is illustrated by the cover of the book *Le Parlement des Femmes*, and by a drawing of the "bridle", an instrument of punishment which concerned in fact mostly women. The legend of the illustration does not specify however that its use, pretty much, was limited to Scotland, where it originated, and will thus make the reader believe that it was a widespread practice.

But one of the most significant–and, dare we say, unworthy–examples of *Caliban*'s tendentious processes can be found on page 206, with an illustration that reproduces the cover–the public dissection of a woman's body–of the book *De Humanis Corporis Fabrica*, published in 1543 (shown below). Nowhere is it stated that the author of the book is Vesalius, nor that it is the first modern treatise on anatomy, considered a turning point in the history of medicine, attempting, for the first time, to correctly represent the human body (including the female genitals). For Federici, the scene illustrates something else: "The triumph of the male, of the ruling class, of the patriarchal order through the constitution of a new anatomical theater cannot be more complete."

It will be understood, the essential point in her eyes is that the dissected body is that of a woman, necessarily humiliated by the operation. Now, when we go through period illustrations about public dissections, we quickly see that the great majority of them, including the famous Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp of Rembrandt, were practiced on bodies of men and not women, and the illustration chosen by Federici is rather the exception than the rule–she herself shows a picture of dissection of a clearly masculine body, on page 216.

Let us add, as regards the book of Vesalius, that for their part, the specialists seem to have some difficulties to interpret the details of the scene and to identify the characters.[7] But for Federici, everything is clear: "The female character in the background (perhaps a midwife or a prostitute)

looks down, probably shame at the obscenity of the scene and its implicit violence." Aligned in some way with medieval prejudices about dissections, with regards to the founding work of modern anatomy, and a new, more scientific look at the body, Federici retains–and offers his readers–only her own fantasies.

C. A thousand and one ways to deal with the facts

Only an army of specialists determined to sacrifice their time without counting could rectify all the assertions as peremptory as inaccurate that mark out *Caliban*. The lack of seriousness and the freedom taken with the facts transpire throughout its reading.

We have already been able to appreciate Silvia Federici's rather distant relationship with the figures regarding witch hunts. Here is another example: page 80, which presents the battle of Roosebeke of 1382, between a militia of the weavers of Ghent in revolt and the French army, protecting the interests of the nobles and local bourgeois. According to her, "26,000 rebels" were killed in this battle. However, this number of 26,000 actually concerns the total number of deaths in the battle, both camps combined.[8] In the same vein, a note on page 36 states that towards the end of the Roman Empire, the baggage riots "seized Gaul", while at their largest extension, they held only two fifths. If, contrary to the number of victims of the witch hunt, these are additional errors, unnecessary to the main thesis of the book, they are nonetheless significant of the lightness of the company.

The same goes for several false English etymologies, which have little impact on the content, but which testify to Silvia Federici's propensity to assert things she would like to be true, without taking the trouble–and the risk–to check them. If we may say: sometimes, the devil is in the details. So, on page 305, about the English word "nightmare," she writes "Other animals also play a role in the life of the witch as instruments of the devil: goats and mares (from which *nightmare* is drawn)." In fact, an etymological dictionary can easily teach us that this is a homophony and they explicitly point out that the two have no relation, since the word "nightmare" was rather created from another "Mare", a demonic creature of Germanic and Slavic folklore that came to haunt dreams. The poor mare is there for no reason. Similarly, page p. 311, Federici states that "The English word faggot reminds us that sometimes homosexuals were used as a small wood for the bonfires on which witches were burned." The image is strong but does not rely on anything. Wikipedia's article on the word "Faggot" explores several possible etymologies, but the one chosen by Federici is described as an "urban legend."[9]

If the etymology of words is thus interpreted on the spot, the same is sometimes true of the metaphors they evoke. Thus, on page 307, we learn that in witch stories, they become a toad because this animal is the "symbol of the vagina" and that it "synthesizes sexuality, bestiality, femininity and evil." We have not found any trace of the idea that the toad was a symbol of the vagina, and it seems to the contrary that in the Middle Ages it was often considered the male of the frog. In terms of metamorphoses, tales actually report cases of witches that turn into toads, but the same metamorphosis also frequently affects the 'charming princes'.

Sometimes, in this profusion of ideas thrown on the fly and swarming interpretations, the presentation gives the feeling of contradicting itself. For example, page 256, Silvia Federici makes a new focus:

> I want to emphasize that, unlike an image propagated by the Enlightenment, the witch hunt was not the last fire of a dying feudal world. It is well known that the 'superstitious' Middle Ages did not persecute any witches. The very concept of witchcraft was not formulated until the end of the Middle Ages.

Yet, just a few lines later, she says that "In the seventh and eighth century, the crime of maleficium [evil spell, mischief] was introduced into the codes of law of the new Teutonic emperors." Therefore, we do not really see the meaning of the distinction it makes between repression of black magic and repression of witchcraft. Likewise, she had previously explained that "There is continuity between the witch hunt and the oldest persecutions of heretics who also punished specific forms of social subversion under the pretext of imposing religious orthodoxy" (p. 281). She also notes that the witch hunt first developed in areas where the persecution of Waldensian or Cathar heretics had been most intense, which is somewhat contradictory with her claims about the exceptionality of witch hunts and the break it forms compared to the Middle Ages. As she is well aware, she goes out of her way by saying that very similar things become very different in a context that has changed, which is quite convenient to interpret everything as she pleases.

The contradictions are not only about the facts, but also about the method. Thus, page 266, the reader is offered a critical remark about the absurdity of the accusations made during the witch trials: “Even today, however, some historians ask us to believe that witch-hunting made sense in the context of contemporary beliefs.” Which acts as saying: when it comes to accusations of witchcraft, it is important to consider their unfounded character. But why write on page 224, about the supposed magical powers of women: “It would not lead to anything to know whether these powers were real or imagined”, if if not to apply a “double standard” to beliefs, depending on the sympathy felt with those who claim them?

Finally, because of both the choice of vocabulary and the elasticity of the concepts used, the reader is confronted throughout the book with a more or less strong but fairly permanent impression of anachronism. Thus, when describing the class struggles in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Federici paints with a bazooka a “dominant class” in which bourgeois and nobles seem to have already completely merged, facing a proletariat already largely constituted 200 years before the industrial Revolution. The struggles of heretics, for their part, are identified (albeit in inverted commas but “not exaggerated”) to a “first” international proletarian “. Likewise for the so-called Cabochian uprising, in Paris in 1413, described (always with quotation marks) as “workers democracy” (p. 85), or that of the Ciompi, in Florence, promoted on the following page–and this time, without quotation marks–at the rank of “dictatorship of the proletariat”. As for the mentalities of the fifteenth to eighteenth century, they are described on pages 299-300 as completely dominated by the bourgeoisie, which is not (yet) the dominant class in most of the regions concerned. The nobility also tends to disappear from the book, as if it were already an epiphenomenon in modern times.

This feeling of anachronism seems to be rooted in the very origins of the author’s project, which states in the introduction that she has forged her analysis of witch hunts by observing the effects of the World Bank’s policy in Nigeria when she taught there in the 1990s. When everything is so similar to everything, whatever the context and times, we get formulas like the one on page 112, about the privatization of land, presented as a world phenomenon in the context of the birth of capitalism:

The process of privatization of the most massive land took place in America where, in the middle of the seventeenth century, the Spaniards had appropriated a third of the indigenous communal lands with the system of *encomienda*. The enslavement in Africa also resulted in the loss of land, which deprived many communities of their best young people.

However, it is very strange to speak of “privatization of land” about a pure and simple conquest via plundering coupled with an intensification of the capture of African slaves that was not accompanied by any territorial conquest at that time (the Europeans most often did not capture the slaves themselves and left the dirty work to local groups they favored). The question of privatization really obsesses Silvia Federici, who proposes on page 145 this other formula, to say the least mysterious: “Even the individual relationship to God was privatized.” One can certainly imagine that “an individual rapport” with God is something other than “privatize’. But note that this paragraph, which explains that “everything has been privatized, even the relationship with God”, is followed by another one that concerns the development of *public* assistance and the state of the relationship between classes. Understand if you can.

The impression of anachronism is also fueled by an outrageous and deliberately controversial vocabulary. The same is true of the repeated and unjustified use of words such as “genocide”, “holocaust”, or page 194 of the term “death camps” about damage to workers’ health in the workplace conditions of South American mines. Far from helping to understand what is so designated, this abusive use of contemporary terms referring to Nazi politics blurs the stakes of the past and gives the uncomfortable impression that Auschwitz must always be summoned at all times to strike the soul, as if no horrow below this level of horror, could really be seen as horrible.

In another order of ideas (but in the same spirit), we will note the gratuitous statement on page 376 according to which the slanders spilled on the "oil-bombers" during the Paris Commune of 1871 were "taken from the repertory of the witch hunt." As is also shown by the all-round use of the idea of "enclosures" (see the second part of this text, by Christophe Darmangea). Silvia Federici seems to think that metaphor is the same thing as demonstration, and that the more the outrageous the metaphor, the stronger the demonstration.

D. "Speculative" speculation and sometimes surreal commentaries

The passages which seek to incriminate the philosophies of Hobbes and Descartes, on the one hand as reactionary enterprises, on the other hand as the intellectual base of the witch hunt, are among those where the author gives the strongest impression of torturing the facts to satisfy a pre-established agenda. Rather than seeing in the rationalist dimension of the thought of these authors a progress compared to the dominant religious conceptions at the time, Silvia Federici rather reads in their work what comes to her head. This is so with this passage, page 221, about the design of the body as a machine:

> When, for example, Hobbes declares that 'the heart is a spring [...] and the joints as many wheels', we perceive in his words a bourgeois spirit for which, not only the condition and the destination of the existence of the body are work, but there is also a need to transform all bodily dispositions into dispositions at work.

What is the relation between this very short quotation from Hobbes and what the author tells him to say?

Such extra-textual perceptions sometimes turn squarely into a form of historical conspiracy. For example, on the next page, Silivia Federici unmasks Hobbes and Descartes and reveals that they were actually working for the state. More exactly, she "guesses" the thing:

> Behind this new philosophy, we see a vast initiative of the state, by which what the philosophers called irrational was declared criminal. (...). That is why at the height of the 'Age of Reason', the age of skepticism and methodological doubt, we have a fierce attack of the body, so well supported by most of those who adhere to the new doxa.

Hence we learn that, in the case of Hobbes and Descartes–the rationalist philosophers of the modern epoch–in fact relayed in their works the pre-existing political program of a bourgeois state still in the making, but already fully conscious, where it was previously agreed that these same philosophers, in the name of rationality, were most often *opposed* to the powers of their time, namely, the state allied to the Church. We are dealing with fundamental revisions of historical knowledge.

Still in terms of free interpretation, lovers of Freudo-Scatology will be delighted to see that Silvia Federici is following in the footsteps of the Viennese psychoanalyst, theorizing a sort of "anal stage" of the development of bourgeois thought in the organization of work.

> We can relate the great medical passion of the time, the analysis of excrement, from which we drew multiple deductions on the psychological tendencies of the individual (and vice versa), to the conception of the body as a receptacle of impurities and hidden dangers. Clearly, this obsession with human excrement reflected in part the disgust that the middle class was beginning to feel for the nonproductive aspects of the body (...). But in this obsession can also read the bourgeois need to regulate and clean the machine-body of any element that could interrupt its activity, and create "dead time in the expenditure of work.

Clearly? Really? one could think more simply that these medical practices related to excrement have, as for bleeding, a relationship with the pre-scientific conceptions of the

body which are at the time those of the theory of humours. The author practices here a sort of *mise en abyme*[10], of her subject, for, like the physicians of the time of which she speaks, she also makes shit say a lot of things, according to her humour.

On page 304, we move from Freudian free interpretation to the true Lacanian interpretative delusion, the one who sees a Phallus in any vaguely oblong form:

> The repulsion that non-procreative sexuality began to inspire is reflected in the myth of the old witch flying on her broom, which, just like the animals she was traveling on (goats, mares, dogs) was the projection of a penis in extension, a symbol of unbridled lust.

The most fun here is the fact that the mare is considered an extension of the penis, while it is the female horse. What would she have said if the witch had traveled on the back of a male horse, whose reproductive organ's impressive size is known!

In another vein–even another–we cannot ignore how Federici deals with the anthropophagic practices of Amerindian societies. Pretending–against all evidence, as can be seen by reading the books in question–that the first Europeans who recounted these practices used them to reject the Indians in animality, she goes on:

> It should also be noted that the cannibalistic rituals discovered in America and which occupy a good place in the stories of the conquest were not very different from the medical practices then popular in Europe. In the sixteenth, seventeenth, and even the eighteenth century, drinking human blood (especially when blood was harvested after a violent death) [...] were common remedies for treating epilepsy and other diseases in many European countries.

It is true that medical practices of this kind are attested to occur in modern Europe, as evoked by the work of Richard Sugg Mummies, *Cannibals and Vampires*. But it appears that for the purposes of his demonstration, Federici considers as a detail the fact that in Europe, one only drank blood or consumed parts of the body that individuals already deceased while in the Amazon prisoners were captured and put to death for the sole purpose of devouring them.

And since a little sketch of Monty Python is often better than long explanations, let's bring up the "Liver Donation" to illustrate the subtle difference between the two types of situations:

E. Derision and rejection of rationalism

Finally, let us emphasize that the lack of scientificity of the demonstration shown in *Caliban* at least has the merit of epistemological coherence, since the author states her rejection of science and its methods regularly during the book. And this is a structuring element of her vision of the world, since several times in the book she quotes and takes up the analysis of Carolyn Merchant, according to which the emergence of scientific rationalism was a factor of increasing women's oppression–and that it has been essentially that.

Let's go back to the manner in which she rebels about the cover of Vesalius' anatomy book: "The anatomical theater reveals to the public a disenchanted body, desecrated." She thus assigns Vesalius, whom she ends up quoting later in the text, a "mechanistic" vision of the body conceived as a machine. But what does she propose instead? A more fantastic and less scientific vision of the body, like page 219, where we learn that nascent anatomical science is also part of the grand conspiracy to enslave women in the service of capitalism:

> To lay down the body in terms of mechanics, void of any intrinsic teleology, those 'occult virtues' attributed to it by natural magic and popular superstitions of the time, made intelligible the possibility of subordinating it to

> a restful work process, increasingly on consistent and predictable patterns of behavior.

Silvia Federici devotes long explanations to explain that the attacks on witches were also a rationalistic attack against the magic vision of the world, a vision that for its part would have been more respectful of nature and the body. According to her, capitalism needed to destroy the belief in magic to impose its own vision of the world, and rationalist philosophers knowingly helped it. She quotes in support of this thesis another small passage from Hobbes, according to which people would obey better if the belief in magic was eliminated. Hobbes is indeed a philosopher of the order, panicked by the abuses of the English civil wars and whose ideas aim above all at the avoidance of chaos. However, here is restored the entire passage of *Leviathan* incriminated by Federici:

> If the superstitious fear of the spirits was dismissed, and with it the divinatory practices made from dreams, the false prophecies and many other things that depend on them, by which clever and ambitious individuals deceive the little people, humans would be better off willing they are only to civil obedience.

We can see that what motivates Hobbes, just as much as the social order, is to fight against the power given by the possibility of exploiting the credulity of others. And in modern Europe, for which Federici tends to forget or minimize the weight of the Church, such an approach, that of of materialistic philosophers like Hobbes, has something subversive, as seen in *Leviathan*:

> For the wandering fairies and ghosts, the opinion [that they exist], I think, was purposely taught, or not refuted, to keep the credit of the use of exorcism, signs of the cross, holy water, and other such inventions of men who deal with spirituality.

For a philosopher of the order, this is a very good attack against what is perhaps, via the abuse of credulity, the main guarantor of the established order at the time!

Certainly, the rationalist philosophers of that time were, in their philosophical as well as political ideas, far from being proletarian revolutionaries. But then, why not criticize them for the insufficiency of their rupture with the old world, their concessions to anti-rational ideas (in particular, the divine idea), in short, the inconsistency of their materialism? On the contrary, Federici chose, on the pretext of solidarity with the victims of the new order that was then set up, to take over, albeit insidiously, the worst grievances against science and reason.

Thus, to support her anti-rationalist thesis, she draws her quotations almost exclusively from the most conservative rationalist philosophers of modern Europe. We would like to know how much more representative people like Hume, Locke, Diderot, d'Alembert, Holbach or even Voltaire fit into her framework, according to which the rationalists would have been a force at the service of the established order, where *magical beliefs* would have been more liberating than rationalism. In any case, even Newtonian physics, reduced here to the rank of *mere belief*, is indirectly complicit in the witch hunt: "after Newtonian physics had spread the belief that the natural world was empty of occult powers" (p. 237) Between science and magic, comrade Federici chose her side: "Seeking to control nature, the capitalist organization of work had to counter the unpredictability inherent in the practice of magic, and prevent the establishment of privileged relationships with the natural elements," (p. 274); "The fight against magic has always accompanied the development of capitalism, until today," (p. 273). Let's concede, however, that some amazing revelations nuance this picture, even if they do not really help to enlighten the reader; We learn as follows: "Newtonian physics had to discover its gravitational attraction not to a mechanical perception, but to a magical conception of nature," (p. 372). Understand that, if you can.

The "materialism" of the feminism claimed by Federici blithely changes into its opposite: a representative argument of ecofeminism, which is politically suspicious of rationality and science, which prefers magic and superstitions. The author's obsession to see

increasing social control in the slightest scientific progress is never convincing, but it turns downright ridiculous when, on page 232, it stigmatizes even the simple vulgarization of astronomical knowledge:

> The inspiring force of the need for social control is evident even in the field of astronomy. A classic example is that of Edmond Halley (the secretary of the Royal Society) who, at the time of the appearance in 1695 of the comet which was later given his name, organized clubs all over England in order to demonstrate the predictability of natural phenomena to dispel the popular belief that comets announce social disorders.

Thus, spreading astronomical knowledge in the population would be "social control"? Does Silvia Federeci find it more liberating to maintain scientific knowledge among elites and to manipulate the good people into believing that this or that astronomical phenomenon would be some sign of the action of an invisible power to which they should submit?

After claiming that the most famous advocates of nascent modern science were not particularly opposed to witch hunts at the time, the conclusion towards which all these tendencies tend to turn appears on page 320, black and white: The question that remains unresolved is whether the rise of the modern scientific method can be considered as the cause of the witch hunt! And she summons again Carolyn Merchant, who explains that the ultimate origin of the witch hunt would be the mechanistic philosophy of Descartes. The argument, of a pachydermic levity, is again based on a simple *chronological coincidence* and on an excessive use of the metaphor as proof:

Merchant sees proof in the link between persecution of witches and development of modern science in the work of Francis Bacon, one of the reputed father of the new scientific method, showing that the concept of scientific investigation of nature was modeled on the interrogations of witches under torture, portraying nature as a woman to conquer, unmask and rape.

How to answer such nonsense?

First, one can easily recall this other sequence of the Monty Python, which calls into question the rational method of investigation in the condemnation of a witch, a classic scene whose content is probably no further from the historical reality than is the development of Federici:

One could also object that the rationalists of the time were not really in a position of strength and that their possible silence can also be explained by the desire to preserve their own lives that may have already been threatened elsewhere. Is it worth remembering that Giordano Bruno also ended his life on a bonfire in 1600, like many supposed witches?

But above all, there is a major counter-example to Silvia Federici's thesis, which she does not mention, in the person of Jean Wier (or Johann Weyer), doctor and philosopher of the sixteenth century, ancestor of psychiatry, who played a role in the fight against the witch hunt by explaining that they were not possessed by the demon but victims of hallucinations.[11] Jean Wier wrote two books denouncing the witch hunt: De praestigiis daemonum in 1563 and De Lamiis in 1582.[12] Here is what Brian P. Levack, a specialist from this period already mentioned:

> His books constituted a frontal attack on the conceptions expressed in Malleus Malleficarum. To support his theses, Weyer used his medical knowledge by claiming, on the one hand, that the so-called maleficia of the witches could be explained by medical and natural causes, and on the other hand, that the witches' confessions relating to their diabolical activities were largely the consequence of a uterine disorder, called melancholy.[13]

Federici evokes Levack a few times in his book. But in light of the above, one may wonder

whether she really read it, or whether she chose to simply ignore any content that did not fit her thesis, knowing that what does not fit with her thesis, very often, is simply reality.

Finally, let us note that the idea hammered by Federici, according to which the advent of modern medicine was a fight led by the triumphant patriarchy, and that the witch hunt aimed at the healers, especially the midwives, has nothing new about it. As early as 1973, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English asserted that the goal had been to eliminate the rivals of male doctors, thereby ensuring male dominance over the medical profession. However, this idea has long been denied–according to the expert cited above, Alison Rowlands, who states:

> The myths without a factual basis forged by nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, which feminists have acritically adopted to serve their own agendas. (...) Historians have refuted the idea that midwives and healers were the specific targets of an elite-orchestrated witch hunt. Midwives were sometimes prosecuted for witchcraft, but they were much more likely to participate in infanticide proceedings than to be accused of using witchcraft to kill the children they had borne.

To conclude part 1

It may happen that changes in society give new ideas to scientists, and that they are led to look differently at a reality that had already been investigated, but which is judiciously re-enlightened by these new preoccupations. This is, for example, in a way what happened in biology with the rise of social acceptance of homosexuality following the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s: as biologists became interested in the sex of the animals they saw copulating they realized that the fact there was among them "couples" of the same sex was more important than they had previously believed, for want of simply being interested in this phenomenon.

This kind of paradigm shift can happen in history, and revisionism can be fruitful.

But for this new perspective to be a step forward, and not just a fad; it must be based on solid observations and on a substantial archive; it must prove its legitimacy in order to correct, or even replace, the old one. Thus, to reassess the historical significance of the witch hunt–and, beyond that, the place assigned to women in the primitive accumulation of capital–as Silvia Federici claims to do, will take much more than pulling numbers out of a hat, indirect "proofs", pure speculation, "forgetfulnesses" that work well for the author's thesis, and, for good measure, some documents diverted from their real meaning.

II. Primitive accumulation and social relations between the sexes

Federici's book raises the question of the historical and logical relationship between the deterioration of the position of women, in the world of work and in society in general, and the establishment of capitalist society. As shown in Part I, we have seen that the book brings enumerable biases, and, frankly, some outright fantasies, to bear on this question, even on the strictly factual level. But it must also be noted that the book does not present itself as a scientific discussion. At no point in the 400 pages of her book does Federici bother to address other possible theses or explanations of the data, nor to discuss their possible weaknesses and show how her point of view is more satisfactory; only *her* point of view is given to (or, should we say, *forced upon*) the reader.

Obviously, the question she raises is in itself entirely legitimate. Historians have long agreed that the period between the end of the Middle Ages and the industrial revolution in Europe is one of a global retreat, both in terms of empirical fact and in terms of legal right, of the status of women. In legal terms, this decline in France hit its nadir with *Le Code Napoleon*, which turned women into permanent legal minors. The movement was a long time coming: the first attacks against the rights of women–removing the right to practice certain trades–occurred as far back as the 12th century regardless of whether the witch

hunt was really a way to put all the women in step (which is questionable, as we have seen), and without idealizing in the least the place of women in the Middle Ages, the fact remains that the transition from feudalism to capitalism was clearly accompanied, in Europe, by a general strengthening of male domination.

However, and leaving aside the obvious, this finding alone does not suffice to infer that women's disempowerment was a necessary condition for the accumulation of capital. Coincidences are not correlations; further, correlations aren't causalities (which in themselves can be diverse and multifaceted). Before reaching such a conclusion, one should consider the different possible relationships between the two phenomena (primitive accumulation and the disempowerment of women) and evaluate their likelihood.

One element certainly makes it possible to exclude "a simple coincidence" from the outset: I speak of the essential role played by the promotion of Roman law, on which all historiography insists, but of which Federici, strangely enough, does not breathe a word (unless I am mistaken). The rediscovery of this law at the end of the Middle Ages corresponded to a double need: on the one hand, that experienced by the rising bourgeoisie, who found there (or found there) an instrument particularly adapted to codify the commercial property (as opposed to the feudal right, which admitted a multiplicity of rights on the same ground; on the other, that of the States in reconstruction, for which this right codified the new range of the public power. Roman Law was also the one that consecrated the legal inferiority of women, giving the (male) head of the family an exorbitant power over the rest of the family (wife, unmarried children, and, originally, slaves)–on this subject, we will be able to consult this very interesting article of Alain Bihr.[14]

There is indeed a causal relationship between the gestation of capitalism and the deterioration of the status of women in Europe. The whole problem lies in knowing the exact nature of this causality, which is far from being as simple as *Caliban* would have us believe since, as we have said, there is no trace of discussion of other theses in the book, it is limited to declining two fundamental arguments.

A. Natalism: Fruit of a demographic crisis?

The first, probably the most original, is that the nascent capitalism would have faced a risk of labor shortage (whether a real or fantasized risk is not clear, nor does it give any sources to establish the existence of this panic). Thus, it is at the highest social level, that of the state, that a strict pro-natalist policy was put in place in order to thwart this possible crisis. Increasingly fierce legislation thus kept women more and more in the role of reproducers, while practices that could lower the birth rate were more and more severely punished.

But if the fact (the policy of birth, the repression of contraception and abortion) is proven, it is difficult to be convinced by the causes invoked. Federici writes, for example:

> The question of labor became particularly urgent in the seventeenth century, when the population in Europe continued to decline, bringing the specter of a demographic collapse similar to that which had taken place in the American colonies in the decades following the conquest. (p. 332)

However, there is no tangible evidence behind this claim. The general, if not unanimous, opinion of specialists mentions a slow population growth from the beginning of the 15th century; one searches in vain for works establishing a "decline", of which, moreover, contemporaries should have had more or less clear awareness.

The reality of the facts thus suggests that the natalist policies pursued by the states should perhaps be attributed much less to the real problems of nascent capitalism than to the unjustified anxieties of its promoters, which is already very different. But above all, in a context of strong military rivalries, there is no need to resort to forced reasoning around

the primitive accumulation to explain that the states of the modern era, amidst inter-state conflict and competition, wanted to have access to the largest population possible. This hypothesis suggests that the natalist policy corresponded to the political necessities of the moment, rather than the demands of the new economic system.

Incidentally, one can only be astonished when reading about this state-sponsored policy of births that, "From then, until today, the State has spared no effort to take back women's control over reproduction" (p. 186). We do not really know what this sentence is supposed to refer to, but there is, at the very least, an ahistorical generalization, which sweeps Malthus and the pill away from the same hand, and sounds strange at the time of legalization of the PMA. in most developed countries, women have acquired both the right to divorce and the right to contraception and abortion, without the impression that the state, as such, is fighting continue to take them back. That there are reactionary political currents that militate in this direction, and that such currents, alas, sometimes win victories, is one thing, but to present such setbacks (or threats of setbacks) as the result of a general political will of the states is, once again, to look at the facts with singularly distorted lenses. What threatens today women's ability to fully control their bodies are the residues of religious backwardness and austerity policies in the health field, and not a supposedly eternally natalist essence of capitalism.

B. Domestic work and capital's profitability

Turning to the second argument, long since formulated by the materialist-feminist current (with which Federici is associated): by providing free domestic work, to reproduce the labor force, women would have helped to decisively raise the rate of profit:

> The development of the modern family was the first long-term investment of the capitalist class in the reproduction of the labor force beyond its numerical growth. This was the result of a compromise, concluded under threat of insurrection, between the guarantee of higher wages, to maintain a 'non-working' wife, and a more intensive exploitation rate. Marx speaks of it as the transition from 'absolute surplus value' to 'relative surplus value' [...] (p. 200)

Let us pass over the inaccuracies (a "more intensive" rate, or the so-called "passage" from one form of surplus value to another) the baseless assertions (the family as "investment" made by the capitalist class, the conclusion of a "compromise" granting, under threat of insurrection, "guarantees" to male workers). From this passage there emerges an indisputable idea: all things being equal, the provision of free work (it would be more accurate to say quasi-free) by a fraction of the working class, for the production of a commodity used in production (in this case, labour-power), represents an additional gain for the capitalist class. The whole question is to know what we can conclude.

Traditionally, the materialist feminist movement saw in it the indication that the subordination of women and their relegation to the sphere of domestic work was a vital dimension for capitalism: the rate of profit could not be sustained if women's work was paid equal to that of male employees. This seemingly convincing reasoning is based on a series of slippages, or implicit assumptions, which are not obvious.

Without repeating all the arguments that one of us had already developed on this subject[15], let us say that, although quasi-free domestic work has undoubtedly represented (and still represents) a boon for capitalism, nothing says that capitalism could not have adapted just as well to another configuration. Essentially, the materialist feminists say "all things being equal, if quasi-free domestic work were paid, there would be a fall in the rate of profit." But there is no reason to assume that all things would remain equal; it is quite conceivable that if domestic work, for whatever reason, had to be remunerated, then "male wages" would have been (still) lower than they were.

Let us end by noting the daring and peremptory assertion that, with regard to productivity gains, the impact of women's free labor greatly overshadowed the division of labor and the Industrial Revolution a complete challenge to the traditional vision of economic history:

> This aspect must be emphasized, given the existing tendency to attribute the progress capitalism made to the productivity of labor to the specialization of tasks. In reality, the advantages that the capitalist class derives from the differentiation between industrial and agricultural work within the industrial work itself [sic], celebrated by Adam Smith in his ode to the manufacture of pins, *are very few* in comparison to those it drew from the devaluation of women's work and their social position. (p. 243, italics ours)

Of course, one waits for the quantitative data to justify this "radical" statement in vain.

C. Women and enclosure

The idea that the trusteeship of women constituted an important, even essential, dimension of primitive accumulation–though we think it unlikely–is not absurd *a priori*, and could be discussed; it would still have to be on the basis of unbiased facts and solid reasoning. Instead, these are often replaced by the other with pure rhetorical effects. We know that the emblematic act of the primitive accumulation was enclosure, the fencing off of the communal lands that ruined the small peasantry in England. According to Federici, the subordination of women must absolutely also be an enclosure. This assertion, repeated many times throughout the book, leads to a formulation such as this one about witch hunts and colonialism: "It is also an enclosure strategy that, depending on the context, could be an enclosure of the earth, the body, or social relations." (p. 382). The reader who has not yet lost their mind will say that either the term "enclosure" is a catch-all supposed to be able to qualify just about anything, depending on the context; or that, in these different contexts (social relations, bodies, etc) it is used in its normal sense–the establishment of barriers". But what are these enclosures that privatize and lock up women's bodies? Even when the formulation is less foggy, the reasoning is hardly acceptable:

> In this new social/sexual contract, the proletarian women replaced the lost land in the enclosures for the male workers, becoming their most basic means of reproduction and a common good that everyone could appropriate and use at will. (...) in the new organization of work, *every woman (apart from those privatized by the bourgeoisie) became a common good*, insofar as, as soon as women's activities were defined as non-work, their work began to appear as a natural resource, available to all, as well as the air we breathe or the water we drink. (p. 195-196, emphasis by the author)

The nail is pushed a few lines further:

> In precapitalist Europe, the subordination of women to men was moderated by the fact that they had access to the communal, whereas in the new capitalist regime *the women themselves became the communal*, since their work was defined as a natural resource, outside the sphere of market relations. (ibid, emphasis by the author)

In what way, in the new society, did every non-bourgeois woman become a "common" resource? Mystery! If, as Federici explains at will, women and their work have, in the course of this evolution, been more *privately* adopted by men than before (father and then husband), we should rather conclude exactly the opposite. If we understand–which is not easy–and compare the economic metaphors used in different parts of the book, then women become during the period considered very oxymoronic "enclosed communal property," in a way. We think that this oxymoron sheds some light on the text, however obscurely, this rather crude confusion between *gratuity* and *communality* has only one explanation: the will to establish at any price a parallel between the fences of the fields and the fate of women, to address the imagination to make up for the lack of solid reasoning.

D. The idealisation of pre-capitalist societies

To return to the thesis, if there is one aspect for which we can quite reasonably establish a causal link between the rise of capitalist relations and the modifications of the "reproductive" social relations, it is the emergence of the nuclear family. For example, one could convincingly explain how the commodification of economic relations tends to dissolve the older, more extensive family forms and to foster the socio-economic unity of a couple and their children. On the other hand, it is much more difficult to situate the place and necessity of male domination in this movement, as well as that of the relegation of women to domestic tasks. We've already mentioned our issues with the conclusions around the impact of domestic work on the profitability of capital (in section B)). But it must also be noted that, in itself, Capital is perfectly indifferent whether this domestic work is done by women exclusively or principally, rather than by men. Free labor is free labor, regardless of the sex of the worker, and the surplus value drawn therefrom is no more gendered than it has an odor.

From the beginning of the book, Silvia Federici tells us that "with capitalist society, sexual identity becomes the vector of specific functions" (p. 23). Yet the specialization of women in domestic work was not created ex nihilo by nascent capitalism; although capitalism has clearly strengthened it, it represents a legacy that seems as old as human societies themselves. Federici, however, paints an idyllic but misleading picture of the relationship between the sexes in previous societies, to better highlight the darkness of ours.

First, she idealizes the place of women in the Middle Ages:

> Peasant Women were less dependent on their male companions, less differentiated from them socially and psychologically, and less dependent on the needs of men than 'free' women were later to be in capitalist society. (p. 40)

Yet, the author points out just after, the limit to the woman's dependence on her companion rested on the authority of the Lord, owner of land and people:

> It was the lord who commanded the work and social relations of women, deciding, for example, whether a widow had to remarry and who was to be her husband; in certain areas, a lord could even claim the juice primae noctis, the right to sleep with the wife of the serf on the wedding night.

This form of dependence and enslavement, therefore, seems a priori hardly more enviable than that which has succeeded it. We read the following on page 179, on the 17th century: "A new model of femininity emerged as a result of this defeat: the woman and the ideal wife, passive, obedient, economical, silent, hardworking and chaste." Certainly. But how is it fundamentally different from the model of femininity proposed in the eleventh / thirteenth century in novels that portrayed courtly love, as described by Georges Duby in a collection with a significant title.

The man who takes a wife, regardless of his age, must behave like a senior and hold this woman in check under his tight control. (...). The agreement begins with this postulate, obstinately proclaimed, that the woman is a weak being who must be necessarily submissive because she is naturally perverse, that she is destined to serve the man in the marriage, and that the man is in legitimate power to make use of her. (Georges Duby, « L'amour en France au XIIe siècle », Mâle Moyen Âge, Flammarion, 1988, p. 37)

And it is not for nothing that a specialist of the medieval history genre, although without denying the later degradation of the feminine position, can conclude his work on the subject in the following way:

> In many areas, [the distinction of sex from the twelfth to the fifteenth century] results in male domination and a devaluation of the feminine.[...]
>
> In modes of representation, the feminine is on the side of the carnal and the masculine, on the spiritual. [...] The inferiority and devaluation of women lead to their exclusion from the priesthood, the university or the urban power. She

> is more present in hell than in paradise. [...] She receives less education, occupies little space in literature, arts and culture. On a legal level, she remains an eternal minor, dependent on men. In crimes and offenses, she is more victim than offender. [...] High gender diversity and low division of labor tasks do not prevent higher male wages, a lower proportion of women in lucrative and socially recognized jobs, and the possession of the most sophisticated tools by men.
>
> *D. Lett, Hommes et femmes au Moyen Âge, Armand Colin 2013, p. 211-213*

But it is also, and above all, colonized societies, such as those of pre-Columbian America, which are the subject of a retrospective fascination that is largely fantasy. It is therefore not surprising when Federici states women were "in a position of power (...) [which] is reflected in the existence of many female deities" (p. 401). If words have meaning, then they were matriarchies. Such a revelation, which contradicts all the ethnological knowledge, is not encumbered with any reference (and for good reason), and relies only on an argument refuted long ago, for a number of societies have worshiped female divinities while remaining perfectly patriarchal.

E. Capitalism and the situation of women

A bias in one sense doubles itself as a bias in another sense: in Federici's interpretation of the facts, capitalism is unilaterally presented as a system degrading the position of women. This degradation, seen as a necessary condition of the birth of capitalism, is also supposed to mark all its later evolution, until today. But such a tale of the effects is (at best) lying by omission.

To begin with, the period Federici deals with is less about capitalism itself than about the hybrid social forms that preceded it. The sixteenth century was certainly in the process of engendering capitalism, but it was still far enough away that the bourgeoisie was forced, in the following centuries, to overthrow the political power by force in order to impose the new social structure.

Then Federici herself shows (for once with precise examples) that the process of monetarizing the economy from the 12^{th} to the 15^{th} century led many rural women to migrate to the cities, where they had access to a variety of different jobs and more autonomy, which is perfectly contradictory to the general thesis of the book.

Starting in the industrial revolution, and in a more and more marked manner in the twentieth century, the capitalist system has undeniably produced an emancipatory effect on the condition of women, in a vivid way in the heart of the richest countries. We live in the first of all known human societies that has conceived of the ideal of gender equality– that is, the social undifferentiation of genders. Even if this ideal is still far from being fully realized, our societies are none the less the only ones to have, legally, brought down one by one all the barriers that legally separated women from men, particular as regards the access reserved for certain positions or jobs. The fact that the world's leading states have been promoting (at least in words) gender equality for decades is part of this movement. Moreover, this fact is also one of the elements which make it possible to think that such a program of gender-equality hardly subverts Capital, which is served by these States with zeal.

Here again, of course, we can discuss why this evolution has occurred; in fact, one of us has already proposed a materialist explanation for it, in a book published a few years ago.[16] But in the text of *Caliban*, the discussion is not even possible–if only to try to understand the reversal from the tendencies observed at the Renaissance: this major dimension of reality is simply evacuated. Under Federici's pen, capitalism becomes a system that, systematically and for congenital reasons, can only relegate women to the domestic sphere and organize their oppression.

F. The addition to historical materialism

This account cannot be completed without mentioning the few passages in which Federici explicitly intends to criticize Marx and, above all, to reconsider the place of the capitalist system in social evolution. Thus, it appears that "Marx could never have thought that capitalism opened the way to human emancipation if he had considered this story from the point of view of women. "(p. 21). By thus suggesting that, if Marx attributed to capitalism a progressive historical role, it is because it would have improved the situation of the workers, Federici shows that she did not understand one of his most elementary ideas (or that she pretends not to have understood it, but the result is the same). All Marx's reasoning, all the "scientific" character of his socialism, rested on the idea that capitalism, by developing the productive forces, set up, for the first time in human social evolution, the conditions of socialism. As we have just said, it should be added that capitalism has also laid the foundation for the disappearance of the sexual division of labor, that is, the emancipation of women.

But Federici handwaves this away. After recommending, on page 39, to avoid idealizing "the servile medieval community" as a model of collective organization of work, she does just this a little further in describing a model of "primitive communism" on the the basis of which it would have been possible for humanity to economize the capitalist stage of its development–here we find the logic of the Russian Narodniki, against whom the revolutionary workers' movement was constructed. Federici also boldly asserts that the "proletarian" struggles of the late Middle Ages might well have been victorious (p. 107)– without, however, informing the reader of the type of society that might have emerged from such hypothetical victories–, and the text proposes a vision for the least original of the social evolution of the last centuries:

> Capitalism was the counter-revolution which reduced to nothing the possibilities opened by the anti-feudal struggle. These possibilities, if they had become realities, would have spared us the immense destruction of human lives and the natural environment which marked the progress of capitalist relations throughout the world. (p. 36)

As for the idea, fundamental to Marx, that capitalism represented in relation to feudalism "a superior form of social life", it is "a belief (...) [which] has not yet disappeared." (p. 36). In case you have a doubt, this idea is repeated a little further:

> It is not possible to equate capitalist accumulation and the liberation of workers, women or men, as many Marxists have done (...) or to understand the emergence of capitalism as a moment of historical progress. (p. 118)

What emerges from this? On the one hand, whether voluntarily or not, Federici impoverishes Marx's statement, making him say that capitalism represents an emancipation, where he defended the idea that he sets the conditions for future emancipation, which is more than a nuance. But above all by claiming, without any kind of justification, that medieval societies could have given birth directly to a socialist society and that capitalism, from this point of view, was not a step forward but a step backward, Federici throws overboard precisely the materialism she said she claims. Into the dustbin goes the close link between the forms of material production and social relations; the idea, a thousand times developed and illustrated, that capitalism–the great industry, the advance of the techniques and the sciences, the creation of the world market, the concentration and the internationalization of the production–has for the first time in human history laid the foundation for an equal society; also in the dustbin goes the symmetrical idea that, without this development of capitalism–if society remained in the limited pre-capitalist forms of production, the rule "to each according to his needs" can only remain unfulfilled, and that:

> This development of productive forces (which itself implies the actual empirical existence of men in their world-historical, instead of local, being) is an absolutely necessary practical premise because without it want is merely made general, and with destitution the struggle for necessities and all the old filthy business would necessarily be reproduced.
>
> *(Marx, The German Ideology, p. 11)*[17]

Only the flat statement remains, and at bottom a reactionary nothing, that capitalism brought only evils and that human societies, in a way, "was better before."

Conclusion

The last (but not the least) question about *Caliban* is why such a questionable book has received so little criticism and so much praise, even in circles that claim to be Marxist.

A first possible element of an explanation lies in the fact that academic historians consider, regrettably, that noting the many errors of a text intended for the general public and whose author is not related to their discipline is a waste of time.

But, more deeply, the answer is self-evident: *Caliban*, despite all the weaknesses of his lyrics, sings a tune that pleases. To begin with, it appears as an additional avatar of innumerable stories about primitive matriarchy–the author does not hesitate to repeat Bachofen and Engels' outdated conceptions of the "historical defeat of the female sex"; but, here, the story has been modernized. This defeat is supposed to stem, just as much as the birth of social classes, from capitalism: the last lost paradise was only a few centuries ago; and clearly, in the eyes of the author, it still exists in many parts of the Third World that resist "neoliberal globalization." The story, like so many others before it, implicitly plays on the misleading feeling that a past in which women have held a favorable position would be a base for their future struggles.

But how, even beyond the absence of seriousness and honesty in the restitution of historical material and data, can "Marxists" subscribe, sometimes enthusiastically, to a narrative that turns its back on the most basic analyzes of historical materialism? It's sort of a sign of the times and a further proof that social relationships are stronger than words and abstract references. The idea that, in the march to a world free of exploitation, capitalism has represented a necessary stage of social evolution, is obvious to the militants who intend to rely on the collective strength of the international proletariat, this exploited class has been created by capitalism. But in a context where this proletariat has been plunged for decades into political sluggishness, many people now refuse to see it as a force and come to consider that its existence (and, more generally, that of the all the material and social transformations brought by capitalism), is only an unimportant detail–even an obstacle to the path of a socialism henceforth envisaged as an idealization of ancient societies.

There is more. The belief that male domination is a vital dimension of capitalism legitimizes (or seems to legitimize) the feeling that fighting for gender equality would *ipso facto* be a fight against capital. We are living in a time when it is infinitely easier to campaign on the ground of feminism–most often, in environments that are not the most exploited–than on that of communist ideas, and among the workers' ranks. Therefore, it is tempting to convince oneself that the feminist struggle is an acceptable substitute to the communist struggle. This is unfortunately false, and if, as is the case here, under the cover of "radicalism", this renunciation is accompanied by a fawning look upon anti-rationalist ramblings, an idealization of pre-capitalist societies and the abandoning of the most fundamental reasoning of Marxism, the resignation takes on the appearance of debacle.

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[1] Usus is the right to use a thing; Fructus is the right to the fruits produced by or derived from a thing without diminution of the thing's substance; and Abusus is the right to dispose of a thing as long as such disposal is not infringing upon health, safety and welfare

(https://libguides.law.lsu.edu/c.php?g=664726)

[2] an early symptom indicating the onset of a disease or illness.

[3] In science, “cherry-picking” is a fraudulent technique that consists, among a host of results, to retain only those who are in the direction of the original thesis deliberately ignoring the contrary results

[4] The editor's work, which does not help understanding, can be deplored. For example, in the second edition, page 89, we can find an illustration with a legend about the damage of the Black Death of 1348 in Europe, when in fact it is the depiction of a brothel in the fifteenth century, a error that does not appear to be in the original edition. In the first edition, however, the same legend is found under two different illustrations, page 79 and page 95.

[5] http://expositions.bnf.fr/.../extra/antho/moyenage/3.htm

[6] Robert DELORT, *La vie au Moyen Age*, Seuil, 1982, p.103

[7] https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/De_humani_corporis_fabrica

[8] https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bataille_de_Roosebeke#cite_note-3

[9] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faggot_(slang)

[10] *mise en abyme* is, in art theory, a formal technique of placing a copy of an image within itself, often in a way that suggests an infinitely recurring sequence.

[11] http://psychiatrie.histoire.free.fr/pers/bio/wier.htm

[12] https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_Wier#Le_De_praestigiis_daemonum

[13] Brian P. Levack, *La grande chasse aux sorcières en Europe au début des Temps Modernes*, Champ Vallon, 1991, p. 72

[14] http://www.revue-interrogations.org/La-reinvention-du-droit-romain-au

[15] https://cdarmangeat.blogspot.fr/2014/01/capitalisme-et-patriarcat-quelques.html

[16] https://www.hobo-diffusion.com/catalogue/1175/le-communisme-primitif-n-est-plus-ce-qu-il-etait

[17] https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_The_German_Ideology.pdf