

Summary of 'Witches, Witch-Hunting and Women'

Chapter 2: Why speak of the witch hunts again?

There are important structural aspects of the 16th and 17th c. witch-hunts that still need to be analysed and placed in the appropriate historical context (p. 11). It remains unacknowledged that the witch hunts stood at a crossroad of a cluster of social processes that paved the way for the rise of the modern capitalist world (p.12). According to Federici, the witch hunts can be read as an aspect of the 'Great Transformation' that led to the establishment of capitalism in Europe (p. 13). Therefore we can learn about the preconditions for the capitalist take off through the witch hunts, and about the results of the capitalist take off for women (p. 12).

Chapter 3: Witch hunts, enclosures, and the demise of communal property relations

The rise of agrarian capitalism, starting in the late 15th c., provides a relevant social background for understanding the production of many contemporary witchcraft accusations and the relation between witch-hunting and capital accumulation (p. 15). There seems to be a relationship between the dismantling of communitarian regimes and the demonization of members of the affected communities that makes witch-hunting an effective instrument of economic and social privatization (p. 15). In England landlords and well-to-do peasants fenced off the common lands, called 'enclosures', putting an end to customary rights and evicting the population of farmers and squatters that were dependent on them for survival (p. 15-16). Through increased taxation the same process of expulsion of the peasantry and commercialization of land occurred in other parts of Western Europe (p. 16).

What evidence do we have that land enclosure is a major factor in the production of witch hunts?

In England, as in the rest of Europe, witch hunts were predominantly a rural phenomenon and they affected regions in which land had been or was being enclosed (p 16). Chronological considerations show that witch trials did not occur in England until the 16th c., peaking in the 17th c., and that they occurred in societies where economic and social relations were being reshaped by the growing importance of the market, and where the impoverishment and rising inequalities were rampant (p. 17). Older women were most affected by these developments, for the combination of rising prices and the loss of customary rights left them with nothing to live on, especially when they were widows, or had no children who could help them (p. 17). Widows and poor people were usually provided for in the English manorial society (p. 17). Widows had the right to food, wood, and sustenance, and these rights were guaranteed, but with the loss of customary rights this was forfeited (p. 18). Not surprisingly, many so-called witches were poor women who survived on begging or lived off the 'poor rates', as the first system of welfare in England (p. 18). The crimes imputed to them demonstrate that they were part of a peasant population that had no access to land and could be expected to resent their neighbours' possessions, beginning with their animals, which may have been grazing on land that had once been common. At least 1/3 of the charges recorded between 1563 - 1603 were for bewitchment of pigs, cows, horses, geldings and mares (p. 18).

Poverty, however, was not the immediate cause of witchcraft charges

Witches were women who resisted their impoverishment and social exclusion. They threatened, cast reproachful looks, and cursed those who refused to help them (p. 19). Those who prosecuted them charged them with having an evil tongue, with stirring up trouble among their neighbours (p. 19).

To the economic factors that are in the background of witchcraft accusation we must add the increasingly misogynous institutional policy that confined women to a subordinate social position with respect of men and punished any assertion of independence and sexual transgression as a subversion for the social order (p. 19). A witch was a woman of 'ill repute, who in her youth had engaged in 'promiscuous' behaviour (p. 19). She often had children out of wedlock, and her demeanour contradicted the model of femininity that through the law, the pulpit and the reorganization of the family was imposed on the female population of Europe during this period (p. 19). Sometimes she was a healer and practitioner of various forms of magic that made her popular, which was a danger to the national power structure and its warfare against every form of popular power (p. 19).

That the populace tried to influence the course of events through sorcery and other practices was enough of a threat at a time when enclosures sparked revolts and turned farmers into vagabonds and beggars, and women participated in many protests (p. 20). In the witch the authorities punished the attack on private property, social insubordination, the propagation of magical beliefs, which presumed the presence of powers they could not control, and the deviation from the sexual norm that now placed sexual behaviour and procreation under the rule of the state (p. 20).

The death of the witch served as a lesson and taught women that by becoming accomplices of the war against 'witches', and accepting the leadership of men, they could acquire them protection (p. 22-23). It taught them above all to accept the place assigned to them in the developing capitalist society (p. 23) It is perhaps through opposing women to women, that we discover the secrets of the persecution of the witches (p. 20). Together with the 'witches' a world of social/cultural practices and beliefs that had been typical of precapitalist rural Europe was wiped out (p. 21). We must therefore think of the enclosures as a broader phenomenon than fencing off of land, but also as an enclosure of knowledge, of our bodies, and of our relationship to other people and nature (p. 21).

Witch hunts changed our relationship to animals, because with the rise of capitalism a new social ethos developed that prized the capacity to discipline and channel one's instinctual desires into labor power (p. 22). Self-control became a mark for humanity, and a differentiation was introduced between humans and 'beasts' (p. 22). Animals were demonized, according to the theory that the Devil provided his acolytes with daily helpers in the form of domestic pets, serving to carry out witches' crimes (p. 22) Through the witch hunts a new social and ethical code was imposed that made any source of power independent of the state and Church suspect of diabolism and brought the fear of hell.

Chapter 4: Witch-hunting and the fear of the power of women

Women were charged with witchcraft because of the restructuring of rural Europe at the dawn of capitalism destroyed their means of livelihood and the basis of their social power, leaving them with no

resort but dependence on the charity of the better-off at a time when communal bonds were disintegrating and a new morality was taking hold that criminalized begging and looked down upon charity (p. 25). Women were those most likely to be victimized because they were the most 'disempowered' by these changes, especially older women, who often rebelled against their impoverishment and social exclusion and who constituted the bulk of the accused (p. 25).

Capitalism was born out of the strategies that the feudal elite – the Church and the landed and merchant classes – implemented in response to the struggles of the rural and urban proletariat that by the fourteenth century were placing their rule in crisis (p. 26). Capitalism could not take hold without forging a new type of individual and a new social discipline boosting the productive capacity of labor (p. 27). Therefore the magical conception of the body that had prevailed in the Middle Ages had to be destroyed – it attributed to it powers that the capitalist class could not exploit (p. 27). These were the shamanic powers that precapitalist societies attributed to all or to special individuals (p. 27). Because of women's relation to the process of reproduction, women in many precapitalist societies were credited with a special understanding for the secrets of nature, presumably enabling them to procure life and death and discover the hidden property of things (p. 27). Practicing magic (as healers, herbalists, midwives etc.) was for many women a source of employment and undoubtedly a source of power (p. 28). The 'rationalization' of the natural world – the precondition for a more regimented work discipline and for the scientific revolution – passed through the destruction of the 'witch' (p. 28).

Female sexuality was also seen as a social threat, and if properly channelled, a powerful economic force (p. 28). The capitalist class needed to degrade female sexuality and pleasure (p. 28). The need to protect the Church as a patriarchal, masculine clan and to prevent its property from being dissipated because of clerical weakness in the face of female power, led the clergy to paint the female sex as an instrument of the Devil (p. 29). The repression of female desire was placed at the service of utilitarian goals such as the satisfaction of men's sexual needs and more importantly, the procreation of an abundant workforce (p. 29). In capitalism, sex can exist but only as a productive force at the service of procreation and the regeneration of the waged male worker and as a means of social appeasement and compensation for the misery of everyday existence (p. 30). The restriction of women's sexuality to marriage and procreation, together with wifely unconditional obedience, was instituted in every country as a pillar of social morality and political stability (p. 30). And indeed, of no crime were 'witches' as frequently accused as 'lewd behavior', generally associated with infanticide and hostility to the reproduction of life (p. 30).

In the 16th century, when the structures that in feudal society had regulated sexual conduct entered into crisis a new phenomenon emerged, that of unattached women, living alone, often practicing prostitution (p. 30). The charge of sexual perversion was as central to the trials organized by lay authorities as to those initiated and directed by the Inquisition (p. 31). Charges were copulation with the Devil, and we find the fear that women could bewitch men and bring them under their power (p.

31). Thus no effort was spared to paint female sexuality as something dangerous for men and to humiliate women by publicly shaming and tormenting them (p. 31).

The witch hunt instituted a regime of terror on all women, from which emerged the new model of femininity to which women had to conform to be socially accepted in the developing capitalist society: sexless, obedient, submissive, resigned to subordination to the male world, accepting as natural the confinement to a sphere of activities that in capitalism has been completely devaluated (p. 32).

Women were terrorized through accusations, horrendous torture and public executions because their social power had to be destroyed. Old women, in fact, could seduce the younger into their evils ways and would transmit forbidden knowledge and carry the collective memory of their community (p. 32).

The witch hunts were the means by which women in Europe were educated about their new social tasks and a massive defeat was inflicted on Europe's lower classes, who needed to learn about the power of the state to desist from an form of resistance to its rule (p. 33). At the stakes not only were the bodies of the 'witches' destroyed, so was a whole world of social relations that had been the basis of women's social power and a vast body of knowledge that women had transmitted from mother to daughter over generations (p. 33).