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Transcending the dichotomy between "gender" and "class": The construction of a new gender identity as condition of capitalism

Transcendendo a dicotomia entre "gênero" e "classe": A construção de uma nova identidade de gênero como condição do capitalismo

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to reconstruct the argument on which Federici bases the thesis that gender is the result of a construction and that the determinations of gender identity and sexuality constructed from Modernity onwards, which are still predominant today, are closely linked to the demands of capitalist life and work relations, thus opposing an essentialist or naturalist interpretation of these categories. In order to achieve this goal, Federici's approach to the social and historical causes of the construction of a new "feminine" social identity will be presented, with emphasis on her effort to show how the need for this identity arises especially in a period of original capital accumulation, but extends beyond, guaranteeing the continued reproduction of the capitalist mode of production. It will also be

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shown how this new social identity and function can only be carried out through a veritable "campaign of terror," crystallized in the phenomenon, for Federici eminently modern, of the witch-hunt. This reconstruction seeks to endorse the author's defense of a feminism which, insofar as it establishes that the identity of "woman" and its alienating social determinations have a necessary connection with the development of capitalism, also proposes the overcoming of the dichotomy between "gender" and "class" through a radical critique of this mode of production.

Keywords: Federici. Gender. Construction. Capitalism. Reproduction.

Resumo

O presente trabalho tem por objetivo reconstruir a argumentação a partir da qual Federici fundamenta a tese de que o gênero é resultado de uma construção, e de que as determinações identitárias de gênero e de sexualidade construídas a partir da Modernidade, até hoje predominantes, são estreitamente ligadas às exigências postas pelas relações de vida e de trabalho capitalistas, contrapondo-se, assim, a uma interpretação essencialista ou naturalista dessas categorias. Para que esse objetivo possa ser alcançado, será exposta a abordagem feita por Federici das causas sociais e históricas da construção de uma nova identidade social "feminina", dando-se ênfase a seu esforço em mostrar de que modo a necessidade dessa identidade surge especialmente em um período de acumulação originária do capital, mas se estende para além, garantindo a reprodução contínua do modo de produção capitalista. Também será mostrado como essa nova identidade e função sociais só podem ser levadas a cabo por meio de uma verdadeira "campanha de terror", cristalizada no fenômeno, para Federici eminentemente moderno, da caça às bruxas. Com essa reconstrução, busca-se endossar a defesa da autora de um feminismo que, na medida em que estabelece que a identidade "mulher" e suas determinações sociais alienantes têm uma conexão necessária com o desenvolvimento do capitalismo, também reivindica uma superação da dicotomia entre "gênero" e "classe" por meio de uma crítica radical a esse modo de produção.

***Palavras-chave**: Federici. Gênero. Construção. Capitalismo. Reprodução.*

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to reconstruct the argument on which Federici bases the thesis that gender is the result of a construction and that the determinations of identity and sexuality built up from Modernity onwards, still predominant in Contemporary times, are closely linked to the demands posed by capitalist relations of life and work, thus opposing an essentialist or naturalist interpretation of these categories.

In order to achieve this goal, the premises that make up Federici's argument in *Caliban and the Witch* will be revisited with emphasis on their originality. To this end, Federici's approach to the social and historical causes of the construction – as well as to the instruments for fixing it – of a new "feminine" social identity will be explained. It will be shown how the need for this identity arises especially in a period of original capital accumulation,[1] but extends beyond, guaranteeing the continued reproduction of the capitalist mode of production.

The text will also address the innovation brought by Federici in showing that this reproduction is guaranteed not only, as Marx already showed, through the relations of exploitation that take place inside the factory – appropriation by the owner of money and the means of production of a surplus-value, in addition to the value that returns to the workers in the form of wages –, but also through relations of super-exploitation characteristic of unpaid domestic work of maintenance and biological reproduction of the labor-power commodity.

The aim is to show that Federici's originality lies in her understanding that this new identity - which consolidates the modern construction of the "woman" gender, leading to the reduction of the body to a biological destiny (the uterus is transformed into political terrain) and to the social degradation that results in the devaluation of women's work and their subordination to the image of the "ideal woman" - can only be implemented through a real "campaign of terror," culminating in an "ideological indoctrination" and a "collective psychosis" crystallized in the phenomenon, for Federici eminently *modern*, of the witch-hunt.

With this, the author claims to go beyond the analyses made by Marx himself, seeking to overcome what she considers to be an absence not only in the author, but, in general, among Marxists, who, when investigating the phase of transition to the capitalist mode of production, would not dedicate themselves to the profound transformations linked to the construction of "feminility"[2] as an identity property presupposed in the consolidation of this new mode of production or to the witch-hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries as a necessary instrument for this construction.

Federici therefore proposes "to rethink the development of capitalism from a feminist viewpoint," or even "from the viewpoint of the changes it introduced in the social position of women and the production of labor-power" (Federici, 2004, p. 11/12). In this context, the phenomenon of witch-hunting, seen by the author as a central instrument in the process of transforming the identity and social functions that affects women, will be placed at the center of her reflections on original accumulation, insofar as it plays a role as a condition for the development of capitalism, just as much as the phenomena of expropriation of peasants from the land and of colonization.

[1] I employ the term "original" rather than the more common "primitive" to translate Marx' concept of "ursprüngliche Akkumulation."

[2] I prefer the use of the term "feminility" to "femininity" (as well as in Portuguese the use of "feminilidade" instead of "femininidade") to signal the specific meaning of an identity formed through a normativity that, essential to the consolidation and maintenance of the capitalist mode of production, is exclusionary and repressive, endowing the gender identity "woman" with specific properties and functions, which serve as a standard or criterion of "passability" and conformity to this gender.

To this end, Federici shows that the history of the development of capitalism (especially in its transitional phase, or original accumulation) not only coincides with the "construction of female social identity" (p. 15), but presupposes it. More specifically, she explains how, in order to construct this social identity through a real ideological indoctrination, the "political project" (p. 101) of the witch-hunt relies, in addition to the systematic involvement of the State, on ideologues from the most diverse areas, including even representatives of Rationalism and Enlightenment.

Finally, Federici's contribution, which we are interested in discussing beyond to the advances proposed in relation to Marxist historiography, lies in the strengthening of a feminism which, through the theses established by the author, is based on the proposal "to transcend the dichotomy between 'gender' and 'class'" (p. 14). Insofar as it establishes that the "woman" identity and its alienating social determinations have a necessary connection with the development of capitalism, the critique of this identity construction makes it necessary, at the same time, to critique the capitalist economy itself and the conditions from which its reproduction is guaranteed.

1. A balance of power favorable to the workers: heretical-contestant movements and demographic collapse

Seeking to overcome what she considers to be an absence not only in Marx, but among Marxists in general, Federici argues that, in addition to colonization and the expropriation of peasants from their means of production - with their expulsion from the countryside to the cities and their employment as wage-labor in manufactories and later in factories - there is a third fundamental condition for the original accumulation of capital: the creation and fixation of new determinations of identity and sexuality embedded into the category "woman".[3] Federici therefore proposes to focus on the profound transformations linked to the construction of "feminility" as a specific identity and social function, as well as on the phenomenon of "witch-hunting" of the 16th and 17th centuries as a necessary instrument for this construction.

Federici points to some fundamental functions linked to this new identity, including the need to reproduce the labor-power in times of population crisis. An emblematic historical example is the economic

[3] Cf. Federici, 2017, p. 26/292-293. Although Federici mentions *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* in certain passages of *Caliban and the Witch*, the author does not use Engels' work as a counterpoint to her own thesis, i.e. about the neglect, in Marx and Marxism, of the discussion of the question of identity and social function linked to gender as pillars of the capitalist mode of production. In addition to the importance of *The Origin of the Family*, I would like to highlight a lesser-known writing by Marx, *On Suicide,* published in 1846 (titled, in the first and only edition published by the author, as *Peuchet: Vom Selbstmord*), dedicated to addressing "private life," family and private property relations. Michael Löwy, in his introductory text to the Brazilian edition of Marx's essay, states that it is "one of the most powerful indictments of the oppression of women ever published. Three of the four suicide cases mentioned in the excerpts refer to women who were victims of patriarchy or, in Peuchet/Marx's words, family tyranny, a form of arbitrary power that was not overthrown by the French Revolution. Among them, two are "bourgeois" women, and the other, from a working class background, the daughter of a tailor. But their fate was sealed more by their gender than by their social class." (Marx, 2006, p. 18). Still as a counterpoint to Federici's criticism to the lack of treatment of the question of the transformation of women's social identity and function as a phenomenon of capitalism in Marxist historiography - without calling into question the relevance of her criticism of the lack of treatment of the witch-hunt phenomenon as an instrument for this transformation - I would like to take this opportunity to highlight, among others: August Bebel, *Die Frau und der Sozialismus,* 1879; the production of Nadezhda Krupskaya, one of the editors of the newspaper *Rabotnitsa* (*The working woman*) from 1914 onwards and Alexandra Kolontai (see especially SCHNEIDER, Graziela (Org.). *A revolução das mulheres: emancipação feminina na Rússia soviética: artigos, atas, panfletos, ensaios*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2017); Vladimir I. Lenin (*On the Emancipation of Women*); Clara Zetkin (*Lenin and the Women's Movement*). In Brazil, more recently, Heleieth Saffioti (among others, *Gênero, patriarcado, violência*).

and demographic collapse of the 14th and 15th centuries, with the Great Famine and the Black Death causing a shortage of labor-power and making it more expensive, as well as causing the collapse of feudal rent. As a reaction, the feudal lords and, in the cities, the embryonic bourgeoisie made up of large merchants and traders, tried to re-establish compulsory labor services or even resort to slavery (Federici, 2004, p. 44-45).

Against this onslaught, the growing landless proletariat, which had already responded throughout the Middle Ages through protest movements characterized as heretical (p. 31-36), began to offer confrontations that became true wars (p. 45). Federici describes the increase in combativeness and the discovery of a common cause between different groups, characteristic of these protest movements, especially during the 14th century: men and women, peasants, and, in the cities, artisans, independent waged workers and an increasingly important mass of poor people, united themselves in insurrections and seizures of power in which they demanded not only better living and working conditions, but radical changes, calling into question the political and social organization in force and threatening, on the one hand, the landowning nobility and, on the other, the patrician merchants – two social groups that, in many regions, began to integrate, functioning as a single power structure (p. 41).

This combativeness, strengthened by the solidarity between different groups of workers, added to the situation of scarcity of labor-power, changed the relations of power in their favor, with wages rising and the cost of living falling: "[...] for a broad section of the Western European peasantry, and for urban workers, the 15th century was a period of unprecedented power" (p. 46). This improvement also affected women, whose wage gap with men fell dramatically during the period of the Black Death.

2. Capitalism, State and counter-revolution

Against this backdrop of social protest, the new capitalist relations of life and work appear, for Federici - going against traditional historiography -, not as a revolution in relation to the feudal mode of production, but, on the contrary, as a "counter-revolution that destroyed the possibilities that had emerged from the anti-feudal struggle" (p. 21).

In this counter-revolution, the State is mobilized to take on a central role. In "Sexual Politics, the Rise of the State and the Counter-Revolution," the last part of the first chapter of *Caliban and the Witch*, Federici highlights the actions of the State to fragment or weaken the solidarity that existed among workers in heretical social protest movements, especially from the end of the 15th century. In this context, two State policies were introduced with the aim of causing a division between men and women, turning the latter into real scapegoats: the decriminalization of rape and the institutionalization of prostitution.

Federici thus shows the extent to which exploitation and class antagonism are closely linked to the gender oppression manifested through the misogyny and sexism created by these State policies. In this sense, the author states:

> efforts were made by the political authorities to co-opt the youngest and most rebellious male workers, by means of a vicious sexual politics that gave them access to free sex, and turned class antagonism into an antagonism against proletarian women (p. 47).

The same logic will characterize the construction and strengthening of racism, which will serve to break down solidarity and division between white, black, and indigenous workers at a time when, hostile to the same masters, they formed alliances in the American colonies (p. 106). "Like sexism," writes Federici,

making the link between the need to foster different types of oppression and the reproduction of exploitation, "racism had to be legislated and enforced" (p. 108). Furthermore, the intensified violence towards women through the introduction of these two policies will have a huge impact on the witch-hunt phenomenon (which the author will go into more detail later in the text):

> The legalization of rape created a climate of intense misogyny that degraded all women regardless of class. It also desensitized the population to the perpetration of violence against women, preparing the ground for the witch-hunt which began in this same period (p. 48-49).

Therefore, "the centralization of the state, as the only agent capable of confronting the generalization of the struggle and safeguarding the class relation," a movement already employed at that time, was intensified in the 16th and 17th centuries, with the population fall in America and the reduction of the colonial economy, and, in Western Europe, a new demographic and economic crisis. In this context, "the state became the ultimate manager of class relations, and the supervisor of the reproduction of labor-power" (p. 49).

This time, however, the need for a new State intervention is aimed not only at weakening class solidarity and breaking the contestatory character of heretical movements, but also at the quantitative increasing and production, through disciplining, of work-force (p. 83ff.). The production or reproduction of labor-power commodity in sufficient numbers – or in excess, if we take into account the constitutive function of what Marx calls the "industrial reserve army" or "relative surplus population" as a vital element in the process of wage dumping and the growing appropriation of surplus value[4] – as well as its "taming" (p. 100), will be guaranteed above all by the introduction of a population policy characteristic of a biopower regime (p. 85 ff.).

This idea will be reinforced in chapter 2 of *The Caliban and the Witch*, entitled "The Accumulation of Labor and the Degradation of Women: Constructing 'Difference' in the 'Transition to Capitalism'," in which the author introduces the thesis that the expropriation of peasants from the land, accompanied by the systematic introduction of wage labor, and slavery – as a forced labor regime present not only in the colonies, but also in 15th century Europe, where it fails only through a great peasant resistance movement – are not the only means for original accumulation. This process would also require the transformation of the body into a working machine and, in particular, the subjection of women's bodies in order to reproduce the labor-power.

In this sense, the social changes introduced into the social position of women, "primarily dictated by the search for new sources of labor as well as new forms of regimentation and division of the work-force" (p. 66) and "resulting in the construction of a new patriarchal order" (p. 68), are essential. Taking this context into account, Federici states that "women suffered a unique process of social degradation that was fundamental to the accumulation of capital and has remained so ever since." (p. 75).

3. Politicization and the transformation of the body into a working machine

In this context, the State once again plays a fundamental role. In addition to the breaking down of solidarity it caused in relation to the protest movements of the 15th century, it began to exert pressure on procreation in order to guarantee the availability of labor-power commodity and to carry out its disciplining.

[4] See especially *Capital*, volume 1, chapter 25, topic 3: "The Progressive Production of a Relative Surplus Population or Industrial Reserve Army".

This disciplining is characterized by the author as a process of "social enclosure," in reference to the enclosure of communal lands characteristic of the transition from feudalism to capitalism:

> [...] the physical enclosure operated by land privatization and the hedging of the commons was amplified by a process of social enclosure, the reproduction of workers shifting from the openfield to the home, from the community to the family, from the public space (the common, the church) to the private (p. 84).

In chapter 3, "The Great Caliban: The Struggle Against the Rebel Body," the author takes up the issue again, defending the strong thesis that "the development of the 'human machine' was the main technological leap, the main step in the development of the productive forces that took place in the period of primitive accumulation." (p. 146). Federici shows how the production of a disciplined work-force requires "a new concept of the body and a new policy toward it" (p. 137), a "capitalist science of work" (p. 139) whose desired result is "the imposition of a stricter workdiscipline" (p. 136) and the subordination of the body "to a work process that increasingly relied on uniform and predictable forms of behavior" (p. 139). Federici also shows how Descartes' and Hobbes' philosophical conceptions of the government of the body, apparently opposed, played a crucial and complementary role in the development of this science:

> On one side, we have the Cartesian model that, starting from the assumption of a purely mechanical body, postulates the possibility of developing in the individual mechanisms of self-discipline, self-management, and self-regulation allowing for voluntary work-relations and government based on consent. On the other side, there is the Hobbesian model that, denying the possibility of a body-free Reason, externalizes the functions of command, consigning them to the absolute authority of the state (p. 148).

In her analysis of this process of disciplining, Federici had already resumed, in previous pages, Marx's analysis of the historical movement of the working class formation, which, after a first moment dominated by the explicit application of "conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force" (Marx, 1990, p. 874) – through, for example, state intervention in the application of "a bloody legislation against vagabondage" (p. 896) –, results in the "breakdown of all resistance" and the emergence of workers subjected to voluntary servitude or "silent compulsion" of the "natural laws of production":

> The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws. The organization of the capitalist process of production, once it is fully developed, breaks down all resistance. The constant generation of a relative surplus population keeps the law of the supply and demand of labour, and therefore wages, within narrow limits which correspond to capital's valorization requirements. The silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker. Direct extra-economic force is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases. In the ordinary run of things, the worker can be left to the "natural laws of production", i.e. it is possible to rely on his dependence on capital, which springs from the conditions of production themselves, and is guaranteed in perpetuity by them (Marx, 1990, p. 899).

Federici also relies on Foucault's analysis of the role of the State in the application of biopolitics, according to the theses he sets out in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, *The Will to Knowledge (La volonté de savoir)*, first published in 1976 – although Federici disagrees with Foucault when it comes to

identifying the phenomenon that would have caused State intervention through a policy of biopower, accusing the latter of supposed negligence to the role of witch-hunting:

> It is my contention that it was the population crisis of the 16th and 17th centuries, not the end of famine in Europe in the 18th (as Foucault has argued) that turned reproduction and population growth into state matters, as well as primary objects of intellectual discourse. I further argue that the intensification of the persecution of "witches," and the new disciplinary methods that the state adopted in this period to regulate procreation and break women's control over reproduction, are also to be traced to this crisis. [...] It cannot be a pure coincidence [...] that at the very moment when population was declining, and an ideology was forming that stressed the centrality of labor in economic life, severe penalties were introduced in the legal codes of Europe to punish women guilty of reproductive crimes (Federici, 2004, p. 86-87).[5]

Leaving aside the pertinence of Federici's objections, it is important to point out here that what matters to her, in her critical notes on Foucault, is the same thing that motivated her in her considerations on what had been neglected by Marx: to emphasize, in the process in which "the body was increasingly politicized" (p. 155), its impact on the construction of a new feminine social identity.

4. Transforming the womb into public territory

Federici therefore turns to the consequences of this modern policy in transforming the identity and social function of women. In the submission of the body to the service of capitalist exploitation, there is a need to reinforce, or even fabricate, physiological, psychological and intellectual differences that had hitherto been non-existent or of little relevance, as Federici notes when she takes as an example a comparison between peasants in feudalism: "female serfs were less dependent on their male kin, less differentiated from them physically, socially, and psychologically" (p. 25).

In contrast, Federici shows how the development of capitalism requires an accentuation, if not an *ex nihilo* production, of gender and sexuality differences based on a reduction to a body whose distinctive properties are themselves a historical result, with the consequent imposition of identities and a sexual division of labor that are binary and static, and in relation to which any indeterminacy or deviation is considered a transgression. For this reason, adherents of sexual practices that are not aimed at procreation or who refuse to procreate – be they women with knowledge of conception control, homosexuals, or members of heretical groups (p. 37-38) – are perceived as a threat to be fought against. By way of example, Federici notes that homosexuality, accepted in many parts of Europe until the Renaissance, was eradicated at the very time of the witch-hunt. The use, to this day, of the term *faggot* – whose original meaning is "bundle of brushwood used as fire fuel" – as an offensive term to refer to a *gay* man, directly refers to the time of the witch-hunt, when those identified and segregated as homosexuals were forced to light the fires of those accused of witchcraft – proof, for Federici, that the witch-hunt phenomenon served inescapably for the development of the capitalist discipline of sexuality (p. 197).

Taking this into account, Federici states that, in its concern to grow a population that had become scarce due to the demographic crisis of the 16th and 17th centuries,

[5] A reflection on the fairness of Federici's criticisms of Foucault is made by Cezar Prado in "Expropriação, ascese e controle dos corpos femininos: o surgimento e o desenvolvimento do capitalismo sob três pontos de vista" (Cadernos PET-Filosofia UFPR, 2020).

> the state adopted a set of pro-natalist measures that, combined with Public Relief, formed the embryo of a capitalist reproductive policy. Laws were passed that put a premium on marriage and penalized celibacy […]. The family was given a new importance as the key institution providing for the transmission of property and the reproduction of the workforce (p. 88).

This "capitalist reproductive policy" would thus mark "the intervention of the state in the supervision of sexuality, procreation, and family life" (*idem*), removing from women any possibility of controlling their own bodies, their reproductive capacity and their sexuality:

> the main initiative that the state took to restore the desired population ratio was the launching of a true war against women clearly aimed at breaking the control they had exercised over their bodies and reproduction. […] this war was waged primarily through the witch-hunt that literally demonized any form of birth-control and non-procreative sexuality […] (p. 88).

By reducing an entire group of individuals to their biological capacity to procreate, the aim of this war would also be to impose on them a function of biological reproduction of the workforce. It is in this sense that Federici stated, still in hypothetical form, in her Introduction: "[...] 'femininity' has been constituted in capitalist society as a work-function masking the production of the work-force under the cover of a biological destiny [...]" (p. 14). This new identity is based on the naturalization and biologization of determinations that are considered to be characteristic of the "woman" gender. The conquest of the female body, as a precondition for the accumulation of work and wealth, therefore takes center stage.

> [...] the body has been for women in capitalist society what the factory has been for male waged workers: the primary ground of their exploitation and resistance, as the female body has been appropriated by the state and men and forced to function as a means for the reproduction and accumulation of labor (p. 16).

In the second chapter of *Caliban and the Witch*, Federici delves deeper into the question of the instrumentalization of the body and its reduction to reproductive capacity, marked by the transformation of the uterus into political territory:

> The outcome of these policies that lasted for two centuries (women were still being executed in Europe for infanticide at the end of the 18th century) was the enslavement of women to procreation. While in the Middle Ages women had been able to use various forms of contraceptives, and had exercised an undisputed control over the birthing process, from now on their wombs became public territory, controlled by men and the state, and procreation was directly placed at the service of capitalist accumulation (p. 89).[6]

Later, in the fourth chapter, the theme will be taken up again with an emphasis on the phenomenon of witch-hunting, which will be used as an instrument in "an attempt to criminalize birth control and place the female body, the uterus, at the service of population increase and the production and accumulation of labor-power." (p. 181).

[6] An example of the overvaluation and reduction of women to reproductive capacity is given by Federici in reference to the program of the Protestant Reformation and Luther, who states that, "whatever their weaknesses, women possess one virtue that cancels them all: they have a womb and they can give birth" (Federici, 2004, p. 87).

5. Enslavement and alienation of the body as a "natural breeding-machine"

Federici characterizes this submission of the body as a process of "enslavement of women to procreation" (p. 89). The enslavement to which the author alludes goes beyond the metaphor: by comparing the situation of black women on American *plantations*, who, even after the end of slavery in 1807, were forced to become creators of new workers, and women in Western Europe during the period of original accumulation, Federici states, starting from the condition of the latter:

> European women were not openly delivered to sexual assaults — though proletarian women could be raped with impunity and punished for it. Nor had they to suffer the agony of seeing their children taken away and sold on the auction block. The economic profit derived from the births imposed upon them was also far more concealed. In this sense, it is the condition of the enslaved woman that most explicitly reveals the truth and the logic of capitalist accumulation. But despite the differences, in both cases, the female body was turned into an instrument for the reproduction of labor and the expansion of the work-force, treated as a natural breeding-machine, functioning according to rhythms outside of women's control (p. 89-91).

Thus, Federici deepens the thesis that the activity of procreation is not a "fact of nature" (p. 91), but a socially and historically determined activity, serving the development of capitalist economic relations. She states that, in this context, the body is coerced, through a process of domestication or disciplining, into becoming a "natural breeding-machine."

Despite the fact that Marx also explores the paradox of a behavior that, originating in practices of coercion, ends up acquiring, "by education, tradition and habit," a character of necessity similar to that of a natural phenomenon – notably through the idea of voluntary servitude as a key element in the genesis of capitalism – Federici insists, in defense of her thesis, on an objection to him, who, in line with Adam Smith, would consider the population growth that accompanies capitalist development as a "natural effect" of economic development (p. 91). Against this position, Federici questions: "Why procreation should be 'a fact of nature' rather than a social, historically determined activity, invested by diverse interests and power relations, is a question Marx did not ask." (p. 91).

Antagonistic to the spontaneity of a natural fact, biological reproduction, as a coercive practice, ends up generating an alienation of the body:

> In reality, so far are procreation and population changes from being automatic or "natural" that, in all phases of capitalist development, the state has had to resort to regulation and coercion to expand or reduce the work-force. [...] Consequently, women have often been forced to procreate against their will, and have experienced an alienation from their bodies, their "labor," and even their children, deeper than that experienced by any other workers (p. 91).

Thus, although the author doesn't go into it in depth, Federici's critique refers back to Marx's own critique of the capitalist mode of production in its alienating and fetishistic aspect: the relations of work and life characteristic of the capitalist mode of production are characterized by Marx, since the *German-French Annals* (*Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*), not only by an estrangement (*Entfremdung*) of the producer in relation to himself and the other, according to the disuniting (*Entzweiung*)[7] of the human being (*der Mensch*)

[7] Cf. FEUERBACH, L. *Das Wesen des Christentums*. In: Ders: *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 5. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2006, p. 75 (FEUERBACH, L. *The Essence of Christianity*. New York: Prometheus Books, 1989, p. 33.).

with himself expressed in the division between individual and gender thematized by Feuerbach,[8] but – stripping the Feuerbachian religious *Mensch* of its abstract aspect and contextualizing it in the sphere of civil-bourgeois society (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) and in the "world of needs" – by an equally present estrangement in relation to the activity and products of his own work, such as money or private property,[9] which will reappear in *Capital* as different forms of the same content. The process of alienation characteristic of modern relations of life and work is taken up again in *Capital*, now incorporated into the fetishism that Marx characterizes both as a mystification of what is produced and as a "continuous reduction" (Marx, 1990, p. 168) of particular and concrete work to the universal and abstract aspect that defines value itself and its magnitude – as "human labour in the abstract" (p. 128) and as "socially necessary labour-time" (p. 129), respectively –, determined "independently of the will, foreknowledge and actions of the exchangers," so that their "own movement within society has for them the form of a movement made by things, and these things, far from being under their control, in fact control them." (p. 167-168).

In addition to the instrumentalization of the body – and here, specifically, that of women – to its biological function of reproduction, the alienation in the estrangement from one's own body and the fetishism in the concealment of exploitative relations, in the mystification of their contradictions (Federici, 2004, p. 17) and in the lack of control of biological reproduction process, will contribute, as Federici is also concerned in showing, to the movement towards devaluing and making invisible the work done by women: work that, when done in the factory, is poorly paid, or simply unpaid in the domestic sphere.

The social degradation of women and the devaluation of their work (both in the factory and at home), their exclusion from the labor market or the interception of their husbands in the receipt of their wages, corroborated by changes in the law, increase women's dependence on men, a phenomenon that Federici connects to the construction of a new patriarchal order (p. 97 ff.), which she calls the "patriarchy of the wage":

> This policy, making it impossible for women to have money of their own, created the material conditions for their subjection to men and the appropriation of their labor by male workers. It is in this sense that I speak of the patriarchy of the wage (p. 98).

6. Political project of a new patriarchal order: the modern phenomenon of witch-hunting as ideological gender indoctrination

However, the construction of this new patriarchal order, accompanied by the intense process of social degradation of women and the consequent devaluation of their work, would not have been possible without the backing of a political project whose central element is the campaign of terror known as the "witch hunt".

> None of the tactics deployed against European women and colonial subjects would have succeeded, had they not been sustained by a campaign of terror. In the case of European women it was the witch-hunt that played the main role in the construction of their new social function, and the degradation of their social identity (p. 102).

[8] *Idem*.

[9] Compare to Marx in *Zur Judenfrage* (*On the Jewish Question*) and in *Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung* (*Introduction* to the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*).

Chapter 4 of *Caliban and the Witch*, "The Great Witch-Hunt in Europe," is especially dedicated to this phenomenon. In this chapter, Federici seeks to defend at least three strong theses, going against the grain of traditional historiography. Against the view propagated by the Enlightenment (p. 165), Federici argues that witch-hunting is not a phenomenon of the medieval era, "the last spark of a dying feudal world," but eminently modern, whose peak is reached in the 16th and 17th centuries, and more precisely between 1580 and 1630. Furthermore, Federici seeks to emphasize that this is a phenomenon carried out not only by the Inquisition of the Catholic Church, but predominantly by the State through the secular courts, and theoretically endorsed by intellectuals inserted in the movements of Rationalism and Enlightenment. The third thesis, critical of the Marxists, consists of Federici's understanding of witch-hunting as a phenomenon essential to the development of capitalism and the formation of the modern proletariat, both in terms of its increase and its disciplining (in line with the theses already set out by Federici in the chapters dealing with the issue of imposing a new social role on women):

> [...] witch-hunting in Europe was an attack on women's resistance to the spread of capitalist relations and the power that women had gained by virtue of their sexuality, their control over reproduction, and their ability to heal. Witch hunting was also instrumental to the construction of a new patriarchal order where women's bodies, their labor, their sexual and reproductive powers were placed under the control of the state and transformed into economic resources (p. 170).

The degradation to which women are subjected is particularly felt in the legal sphere, where, between the 16th and 17th centuries, a series of changes began to criminalize any form of birth control and non-procreative sexuality practiced by women (p. 88), in addition to legally infantilizing them, so as to take away rights that allowed them autonomy in carrying out economic activities, signing contracts or representing themselves in court (p. 100ff.). Illustrative of these changes is the fact that, from the 16th century onwards, "all the European governments began to impose the severest penalties against contraception, abortion and infanticide" (p. 88), as opposed to the indulgence characteristic of the medieval period.

In addition to this change in the law, there was a new sexual differentiation of space – since women, as well as being expelled from the job market, were discouraged from appearing in public unless they were accompanied by the male presence of their father or husband (p. 100) – and an intensified campaign to defame women in literature and intellectual discourse, the aim of which was to consolidate a new identity for women as passive, modest and private beings.

This ideological campaign is marked by a "steady indoctrination" requiring "much official organization and administration" (p. 166). It is in this sense that Federici states that the witch hunt was "the first persecution in Europe that made use of a multimedia propaganda to generate a mass psychosis among the population." Even the most prestigious intellectuals of the time contributed to this propaganda effort. "Judges, lawyers, statesmen, philosophers, scientists, theologians all became preoccupied with the 'problem' [the accusation of witchcraft], wrote pamphlets and demonologies, agreed that this was the most nefarious crime, and called for its punishment." (p. 168).

Federici even goes so far as to ask whether, in the involvement of representatives of Rationalism and the Enlightenment in this campaign (p. 201), "the rise of the modern scientific method can be considered the cause of the witch-hunt" (p. 202), a question to which Carolyn Merchant would respond positively, seeing a connection between the persecution of witches and the emergence of modern science (p. 202ff.).

For Federici, however, the emergence of modern science cannot be considered the immediate or sole cause of the persecution of witches. It seems to Federici that, in an "ideological *bricolage*," "the intellectual scaffold that supported the persecution of the witches" was the result of a combination that included not only rationalist arguments, but also "elements taken from the fantastic world of medieval Christianity" and "modern bureaucratic court procedures," and whose aim was social degradation and the establishment of a new identity and role for women (p. 203).

Especially in "The Taming of Women and the Redefinition of Femininity and Masculinity: Women the Savages of Europe" (second chapter), Federici shows that, in this narrative woven about women, they were seen as "inherently inferior to men — excessively emotional and lusty, unable to govern themselves — and had to be placed under male control." (p. 100-101). And, further on:

> Women were accused of being unreasonable, vain, wild, wasteful. Especially blamed was the female tongue, seen as an instrument of insubordination. But the main female villain was the disobedient wife, who, together with the "scold," the "witch," and the "whore" was the favorite target of dramatists, popular writers, and moralists (p. 101).

In this sense, Federici states that "the literary denigration of women expressed a precise political project aiming to strip them of any autonomy and social power." (p. 101). The real aim of the witch-hunt was, therefore, above all to eliminate a certain type of woman – protesting, undisciplined (because she took part in heretical movements), subversive (because she didn't obey the discipline of capitalist work) – and certain practices, such as control over sexuality and reproductive capacity.

> [...] the witch hunters were less interested in the punishment of any specific transgressions than in the elimination of generalized forms of female behavior which they no longer tolerated and had to be made abominable in the eyes of the population (p. 170).

The witch hunt was therefore an effective instrument in eliminating practices linked to sexuality that had been accepted until then, but which, because they could no longer be reconciled with the new economic demands of Modernity, had to be eradicated through terror and criminalization.

> The witch-hunt condemned female sexuality as the source of every evil, but it was also the main vehicle for a broad restructuring of sexual life that, conforming with the new capitalist work-discipline, criminalized any sexual activity that threatened procreation, the transmission of property within the family, or took time and energies away from work (p. 191).

On the one hand, therefore, the result of this campaign was a historic defeat inflicted on women, who after "more than two centuries [subjected] to state terrorism," were victoriously imposed "a new model of femininity": "the ideal woman and wife — passive, obedient, thrifty, of few words, always busy at work, and chaste." (p. 103). In the same vein, Federici states:

> The witch-hunt, then, was a war against women; it was a concerted attempt to degrade them, demonize them, and destroy their social power. At the same time, 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 (p. 186).

There is, however, one more desired effect in the use of the witch-hunt program: ultimately, this movement would serve as a mechanism to combat the ability of the entire working class to challenge the existing political and economic power (p. 170ff./p. 189ff.). The vague nature of the witchcraft accusation, which was impossible to prove, "meant that it could be used to punish any form of protest" (p. 170) – an example is the labeling of any potentially transgressive gathering as a possible Sabbat (p. 195-196). In this sense, Federici brings the accusation of witchcraft closer to the current accusation of "terrorism" (p. 170). The witch-hunt served as "a weapon by which resistance to social and economic restructuring could be defeated" (p. 171), or even as a "class war carried out by other means" (p. 176). For this reason, Federici notes that in the 16th and 17th centuries, witch-hunting replaced the fight against the heretical movements of the previous centuries, thus serving as an instrument of repression for the protest movements and thereby undermining their collective power: "Just as today, by repressing women, the ruling classes more effectively repressed the entire proletariat." (p. 189).

Final remarks

Federici's emphasis on the connection between relations of exploitation and oppression in *Caliban and the Witch* is one of the author's most important contributions not only to discussions of gender issues, but also to the organizational challenges posed to those convinced of the need for the "construction of an alternative to capitalist society" (p. 11).

Thanks to the analysis made throughout the book, Federici manages to remain faithful to her goal, i.e. "to rethink the development of capitalism from a feminist viewpoint, while, at the same time, avoiding the limits of a 'women's history' separated from that of the male part of the working class" (*idem*). The need to avoid this division is paramount, especially in view of Federici's thesis that, in capitalism, existing, accentuated or constructed differences serve to forge divisions and hierarchies that are essential to breaking down unity and solidarity between those who share something fundamentally common: belonging to the working class. Differences of biological sex, gender or sexuality, skin color, ethnicity or nationality, or even age, are instrumentalized in guaranteeing the reproduction of capitalism.

It is in this sense that Federici brings capitalist living and working relations closer to slavery, establishing that, unlike certain modes of production where slave labor relations are explicit, "capitalism has created more brutal and insidious forms of enslavement, as it has planted into the body of the proletariat deep divisions that have served to intensify and conceal exploitation" (p. 64). The concealment of exploitation therefore refers to what we could call, in a Marxian sense, a logic of "fetishization of the body," and which reappears, presupposing them, in the hierarchies which, built on differences, are constitutive of the relations of domination characteristic of the formation of the modern proletariat.

Federici is successful in showing, through her argumentative thread in *Caliban and the Witch*, that the relations of capitalist exploitation depend for their reproduction on the relations of oppression emerging from the hierarchies established within the working class. For this reason, Federici states that "capitalism, as a social-economic system, is necessarily committed to racism and sexism" (p. 17), as well as to other relations of oppression, which are fundamental to the process of mystification presupposed by this mode of production:

> For capitalism must justify and mystify the contradictions built into its social relations — the promise of freedom vs. the reality of widespread coercion, and the promise of prosperity vs. the reality of

> widespread penury — by denigrating the "nature" of those it exploits: women, colonial subjects, the descendants of African slaves, the immigrants displaced by globalization. (*idem*).

Regarding the emancipatory power of the feminist movement, Federici's analysis is convincing in showing not only how transcending the dichotomy between "gender" and "class" is possible, but also a *sine qua non* condition for resistance struggles against the most varied types of oppression. This is why it is so important for feminist theories, in their methodological and political stance, to overcome an essentialist and binary point of view on the body, gender and sexuality.[10] At the same time, a feminism for which gender is not "considered a purely cultural reality, but should be treated as a specification of class relations" (p. 14) is needed. For, as Federici puts it, in dialogue with post-modern feminists, "if 'femininity' has been constituted in capitalist society as a work-function masking the production of the work-force under the cover of a biological destiny, then 'women's history' is 'class history'" (*idem*).

[10] Carolina Langnor explores this issue in "The effects of moral panic on the feminist movement: echoes towards the conservative agenda" (Anais da ANPED, 2017). Langnor draws attention to the dangers of a "new radical feminism," "based on the discussion of the binary construction of gender and sex" or on "phallogocentric binary thinking" (p. 3), and which, having a "genuinely liberating intention [...] has produced a 'reverse' effect: the limitation of the category of woman, making it identitarian, genitalized and exclusionary." (p. 5). One of the most serious consequences of this position of contemporary radical feminists is the segregation of agendas such as transsexuality, with accusations such as "transsexual agendas are silencing women" (p. 6) and should therefore not be considered as intersectional agendas of the feminist movement (p. 5-6). For the same reasons, radical feminists oppose non-binarity. Thus, at the same time as declaring gender to be a social construction, they remain paradoxically attached to the binary conceptual scheme and the understanding of the gender category as containing something "genuine, fixed and stable" (p. 9). Based on an interview with a representative of radical feminism, Langnor problematizes the incoherence present in the discourse of this strand: "[...] for the interviewee, the stability of the category woman would be linked to the cisgender experience. Now, if gender is a social construction whose existence is supposedly annihilated by radical feminism, because gender is the source of women's oppression, how could the category of woman be, at the same time, fought and preserved by the dome of experience? [...] In this way, it would be incoherent to reject gender, to decree its end, if at the same time it had to make itself necessary in order to define who could be inside or outside a certain experience supposedly defined by it." (p. 10). Thus, Langnor warns that, confined to this position, "feminism could lose one of its most important characteristics, its capacity to resist and question exclusionary normativity." (p. 13-14).

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