The Witches Cauldron: How the Fear of Satan and a Few Laws Institutionalized Sexism

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Process Paper

When I began the process of writing this paper, I had just read a fantastic historical analysis of the witch hunts entitled *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women,* by Silvia Federici. The analysis used a myriad of social and historical trends and events to prompt the idea that the witch hunts themselves were a near universally necessary step in the evolution of market capitalism. She then goes on to state that this necessary stage of evolution is currently happening in countries all over the world, particularly in those that are transitioning into independent capitalist nationstates after the "fall" of the European colonial empires of the 20th century. I was intrigued by this argument and set out to examine all of her sources. As I read these sources, I started to develop my own analysis of the topic slightly divorced from Federici's analysis in regards to the intent of the original European Witch Hunts.

I began my research by in depthly studying several histological books so as to gain a better understanding of how to study and examine this particular topic considering its contentious matieral. I ordered a number of books on the origin and history of capitalism, as well as a number of books on the history of women, and the history of the witch hunts. I furthermore spent a small amount of time researching the topic online for niche information that was tucked away from the general topics of the books I was reading.

After the research phase, I spent hours figuring out how exactly I would lay down my argument. I probably have 15 pages scrawled with notes on how to organise the axioms for my argument. Ultimately, I decided to go from the most broad questions, to the most specific in providing my argument.

In the paper, I argue that the witch hunts were a successful attempt at creating and integrating a patriarchy through the nature of silencing women, and destroying their power. This is of historical significance in that it both explains in part the origin and proliferation of capitalism as a world economic system, and explains the transitionary period between the original capitalist models of the 19th century nation state, and that's of the feudal economic system. In short it explains how we got where we are, and in some part the continued sexist paradigm that capitalism seems to fuel.

Introduction

The crisis of the 14th and 15th century is perhaps the most consequential series of calamities in modern world history: brother was pit against brother in a war between the Catholic French and Catholic English, the last true Roman city fell, and the bubonic plague burned its way through Europe. To a French or Bohemian peasant, it seemed like God himself was displeased with Europe[1]. The crisis of faith caused by these calamities was compounded by the failure of the landed nobility to protect the serfs, as was their duty under the Feudal social contract. To add tinder to the conflagration of an already burning Feudal world, some began questioning the king's right rule, right to tax, and right to tithe[2]. Others, like Martin Luther, similarly started questioning the church and its practices. With both pillars of the feudal world under attack, a new world view started to emerge, the capitalist worldview. This worldview would go on to change and adapt over several stages of evolution, from mercantilism to neocolonialism. And yet, even through all the evolutions of capitalism, one characteristic of the institution remained certain; it's enforcement and creation of hierarchical social systems.

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[1] Heinrich Kramer. *The Hammer of Witches* pg 69
[2] Saul, John Ralston. *Voltaire's Bastards: the Dictatorship of Reason in the West*

In the 16th and 17th centuries, as mercantilism was taking the place of feudalism across Europe, capitalism began creating an institutionalizing one of its most fundamental hierarchical systems; that of the patriarchy. And while it is true that sexism existed before the 1500's, what did not exist before the 1500s was the institutionalized society of fear and sexist laws that were created to strip women of any social power. These laws meant to silence speech and discontent, along with the broader society of fear that allowed these laws to be passed in the first place, were some of the most successful social bindings in world history, with effects that reverberate to the modern day. The creation of this patriarchy can be explained by looking at how women were influential, how they were silenced, why they were silenced, and the legacy of that silencing.

Women in Pre-Mercantilist Europe

Traditional Gender roles in Medieval Europe are complex to identify because of the gamut that these roles run. Principally, a woman's worth was defined by the worth of her husband[3]. Since the vast majority of men were serfs who lived in small rural villages, the majority of women were just that, serfs who could not officially rise above their station. These women held a number of important jobs in medieval society like caring for children, preparing food, tending and collecting herbs, tending livestock, baking, making textiles, and, at the busiest times of the year, even helping their husbands harvest the grains. These women also found ways around the lack of social mobility by making themselves indispensable. For example, it was the woman's job to brew beer[4] . Alcoholic beverages like beer were a sanitary necessity due to the numerous diseases that could be got from food, drink, and other people, especially after the events of the black death.

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[3] Alixe Bovey "Women in Medieval Society"
[4] Tara Nurin. "How Women Brewsters Saved the World"

Women could also join nunneries, where they could rise to wield incredible political and social power. Hildigard of Bingen once threatened the pope and HRE emperor because her position as a voice of god[5], and as a prominent intellectual figure[6] afforded her a certain protection. It is important to note that sexism was still rampant at the time, and many of these nunneries were placed under the control of male church figures. Hildegard herself, on multiple occasions, faced massive pushback from the male abbots in charge of her nunnery on simple issues like the reassignment of her girlfriend to a different abbot.

Women also often held incredible political power as empresses. Theodora is still remembered in the modern day for her influence over Justinian's ship of state[7], Queen Isabella is noted for helping end the reign of King Edward II, and Eleanor of Aquitaine is regarded as one of the best French monarchs of all time[8]. And so while, yes, there was an incredible amount of sexism and misogyny in medieval Europe, specifically concerning autonomy, women still held considerable power, and could even rise beyond that. Not that this is an endorsement of the arranged marriages and sexist hierarchies of the church. I am simply trying to point out that at this time women were much more rich and politically powerful than is often supposed in the modern age thanks in part to their intellect, cunningness, and biology. I make this distinction because, after the crisis of the 14th and 15th century, we see the destruction of this social mobility and social power, one which is instead replaced by a capitalist patriarchy that endeavored and endeavors to silence women's voices.

The Legal and Social History of the Witch Hunts

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[5] Hildegard von Bingen, *Scivias*
[6] Andrea Hopkins. *Six Medieval Women* pg 85 -107
[7] Empress Theodora. "The Royal Purple is the Noblest Shroud"
[8] Andrea Hopkins. *Six Medieval Women* pg 37-59

In 1487, at the tail end of the crisis of the 15th century, two inquisitors published a book called the *Hammer of Witches*. This book blamed the Wiccen community of Europe for God's vengeful wrath upon the continent, as exemplified in the very first paragraph:

> In the midst of the disasters of the collapsing secular world, which, alas, we do not so much read of as experience in various places, the ancient rising sun, who was perverted through the ineluctable damage caused by his downfall, has never ceased, since the beginning, to taint the church, which the new rising sun, the human Jesus Christ, has made fruitful through the shedding of his own blood, with the poison of various heresies. Nonetheless, he attacks through these heresies at that time in particular, when the evening of the world declines towards its setting and the evil of men swells up, since he knows in great anger, as John bears witness in the book of Apocalypse [12:12], that he has little time remaining. Hence, he has also caused a certain unusual heretical perversity to grow up in the land of the Lord - a heresy, I say, of sorceress, since it is to be designated by the particular gender over which he is known to have power.[9]

The description of witches as agents and warlocks to Lucifer is problematic for a number of reasons. Chief among them was the fact that witches as a whole were often viewed in a positive light, because they offered their services to help people find lost things, and offered spiritual advice[10]. In particular, this spiritual advice endeared the Wiccen community of Europe to their respective communities, and granted these women a certain social power and influence over the serfs of Europe. Unfortunately, the fear of Satan was great, especially in such uncertain times. Fear mongering, in combination with mob mentality, caused the masses of Europe to mobilize into unorganized witch hunting mobs. Over the next several decades, these unorganized mobs would become subject to a wave of new laws as governments around Europe sought to, in some way, control the fear of the peasants[11]. In britain, King James the 1st released his book *Demonology*, as an attempt to calm the British population and secularize the witch trials[12]. The opposite happened. In Germany, there was a sweeping series of laws aimed at calming the

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[9] Heinrich Kramer. *The Hammer of Witches* pg 69
[10] "The King Who Hunted Witches" 0:29:53 - 0:30:08
[11] "The Bavarian Witchcraft Law (1611)"
[12] Tyson, Donald, and Jakob. *The Demonology of King James I*

population and killing these witches[13]. Especially concerning the German laws, a climate of fear was cultivated. However, the true works that silenced women's voices and created the patriarchy began to weave themselves together in more subtle ways.

The common form of this new patriarchal tapestry was legal. Several laws, like the Bavarian purity law, were passed in the early 16th century as an economic and health protection act aimed at keeping people healthy. When these laws were passed, it was the practice for women to brew beer in society. These women brewsters would wear pointed hats to be seen in the crowded markets, would put brooms outside their doors to indicate that they were brewing in their big black cauldrons, and they often kept cats to eat the mice that nibbled at their grain supplies[14]. Unfortunately for many of these women, they were in violation of the purity laws on account of the fact that they put more than just barley into their beers. These women, well to do as they may be for peasants, were still peasants, and so the fine levied against them pushed many of them out. Other women were forced out of the profession due to the rise in price of those principle grains that could now only be used[15]. And so it was on this basis that many women in incredibly economically powerful positions were pushed out of their jobs. After this mass exodus of women from beer brewing, several men would come in and monopolize the industry. Across Europe in Britain, women would similarly be pushed out of beer brewing, but with a twist.

After the events of especially the Black death, with the rising popularity of the sanitary beer, several trends started happening especially in England that highlights this incestuous relationship between business in the enactment of laws. According to Averill Earl's, PhD, the:

> Smaller number of brewers (following the black death) was thus serving much larger markets than previously. Those who brewed, brewed constantly - No more selling once in a year, five times in the next; brewsters brewed and sold constantly. It became, in effect,

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[13] "The Bavarian Witchcraft Law (1611)"
[14] Tara Nurin. "How Women Brewsters Saved the World"
[15] Tara Nurin. "How Women Brewsters Saved the World"

an industry, rather than the piecemeal by-industry it had been. Finally, men were attracted to it. according to Bennett, by the 16th century brewing had established guilds in London, Oxford, and Southampton. Brewer guilds, like all other guilds, excluded woman *de facto*. By the mid 16th century, the profitability of brewing with solidified; brewers were serving regularly in urban public offices throughout England. When it was men's work, it was a profoundly profitable industry.[16]

Governments, in part incentivized by money, and in part incentivized by a need for common protection, created aletaster posts to heavily regulate the open market for beer brewing, a practice which heavily stunted and destroyed the many small-scale women Brewsters with their heavy fines. In the case that the government could not find someone to fill these positions, they would force people into these positions. At the same time, the English government began hiring men from the Brewers guild to act as official government brewers, men who would go on to monopolize the now near empty beer brewing industry. These same men would perform one final act to push these women out of their profession by associating the stereotype of the brewster (pointed black hat, cat, broomstick and black cauldron) with the idea that these things are signs of a witch[17]. The witch hunts, in full swing at the time, would persecute these women by mob rule and burn them.

How is this History Silencing?

Through the advent of capitalism, women were pushed out of highly influential jobs which were taken over by men. Beyond just creating a more sexist and misogynistic environment for the women of Europe, events like the monopolization of the beer brewing industry, and the aristocratic finger pointing of Lichtenstein did one notable thing concerning how women were heard in society. The act of destroying the most socially powerful women in Europe, those with money and those with spiritual power, meant that the most powerful classes of Europe were able

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[16] Averill Earls, "Transcript for Witches Brew: How the Patriarchy Ruins Everything For Women, Even Beer

[17] Kary Waldman. "Why Do Witches Wear Pointy Hats?"

to suppress the voices of women. There was simply no one with the time or resources to speak out in a situation which was not yet bad enough. The few that did speak out were accused of witchcraft or they spoke out mainly against the force against colonialism a world away. It would not be for several centuries until it became bad enough that several women dedicated themselves to the ideals of suffrage, and even then their actions did not solve the capitalist hierarchical system that was put in place by these witch hunts.

Through the regulation of some industries like beer brewing, specifically in the capitalistic way in which these regulations were implemented, the traditional societal roles of women where quickly stripped away. The witch hunts that were simultaneously happening across Europe created a culture of fear for many of these women. In places like Lichtenstein, just for being powerful you would be pointed at and accused of witchcraft so that some petty aristocrats could steal your money. In other places in Europe, simply for being in a powerful position, your position became associated with the concept of a witch. Socially, me emerging capitalist patriarchy was effectively saying, don't be powerful, don't speak out against us, and don't go against us in any way or we will kill you.

Conclusion

Communication is not just solely communication through language. More actually put, it is the impartment of a concept or concepts from one person or group to another person or group. In the case of the witch hunts and the patriarchal capitalist monopolization of many of the most prominent roles for women in society, through the medium of cultural association and the witch hunts, those capitalists were able to establish a patriarchy by pushing woman out of their

traditional roles. This culture association effectively told women in Europe not to complain about it or else they would kill them.

As capitalism spreads across the world, we are seeing the expansion of this culture of fear, of this cultural communication, to the farthest reaches of the world. In American and Canada, there's currently a witch hunt targeting many of the native American women. The only difference truly between these two witch hunts is the end goal. In the European witch hunts, the end goal was the establishment of the patriarchy. Concerning many native American women, the end goal is cultural assimilation into the American patriarchy. In Africa, in many of the post-colonialist nations, a witch hunt is targeting many of the women in traditional spiritual roles. The extra-judicious murder of these woman is much more in line with the European witch hunts.

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