

They're Burning All the Witches (Even If You Aren't One): So, Light Me Up

Statistical rarity plays an enormous role in the witch hunts. This is because those who were accused of being witches were those who were targeted for being poor, elderly or widows. They were statistically rare in their individualities and environments. In the documentary, *"The Burning Times,"* feminist writer and broadcaster Thea Jensen states: "This was the women's Holocaust. Nine million over 300 or more years. These are huge numbers of people who were burned and killed by the Inquisition." (Read, 14:20 - 14:42) Despite this tragic fact, narrator Martha Henry makes an ironic statement: "with the arrival of Christianity, belief became a way of life. Everywhere in Europe, Churches were built over Pagan shrines. Goddesses were turned into Saints. While the Christian Church allowed for Saints, it offered no Divine Goddess to adore. The newly converted pagans found one of their own and demanded that she be recognized." (Read, 17:36 - 18:41) This Divine Goddess she is referring to is that of the first-century Jewish woman of Nazareth, Mother Mary.

The witch hunts were based on objectivist notions of deviance by "the second definition of deviance associated with the objective side of the objective/subjective dichotomy," (Bereska, p.5) of "harm." This can be physical harm, social harm, and ontological harm. However, the witches in the 16th and 17th Century were not basing their practices on causing harm at all. They were perceived as causing harm because they deviated from societal norms and therefore labeled and accused of being "evil" witches. Consider the heroic Patron Saint of France, Joan of Arc, who led the French to victory over the English after a Century of war in 1429. Two years later, she was condemned as a heretic and a witch by the same church that would eventually elevate her to sainthood. The irony endures. She was causing no actual harm, she was "relying on

individual inspiration, a direct pipeline. That wasn't acceptable. If people could rely on direct pipelines they wouldn't need the church Fathers anymore, they wouldn't need the Institutional Church, they would not need the whole system of authority. That was a direct challenge to the most important structures of authority at that time," (Read, 22:10 – 22:38) states Historian Barbara Roberts.

The witches certainly violated norms from an objectivist perspective, as normative violation is defined as "deviance as people, behaviours, and characteristics that violate society's norms." (Bereska, p.8). In the 16th and 17th Century, women were expected to be silent and domesticated. Independent women were a threat, especially because these women who were labelled as "witches" that gathered and were considered leaders, counsellors, visionaries, and healers. As Pagan Priestess and journalist Margo Adler states in *The Burning Times*, "The understanding of 'witch' as 'healer' or 'the woman alone,' the 'strong woman,' the 'woman in nature,' 'the woman at the edge of social change.' All those meanings that we can think of regarding witches are not the meanings that our society sees. They see witches in terms of 'evil,' and they confuse 'witch' with 'satanist.'" (Read, 4:03 – 4:24) This dates to the Renaissance and the period in history known as "The Witch Craze." "By the time it was over, women's power had become associated with darkness and death." (Read, 4:43 – 4:49).

This explains the consequences of the Witch Craze in relation to a negative societal reaction, the third definition of deviance. That is, "deviance refers to those people, characteristics, or behaviours that society's "masses" respond to with negative emotions like anger, fear, or distrust." (Bereska, p.7). Despite these women's healing arts that were rooted in the tradition of their ancestors, they were dismissed by The Church of Rome. People who

criticized the church or held different beliefs were charged with heresy and executed as criminals. “Out of those religious persecutions came the witch hunts. 85% of those killed for the crime of witchcraft were women.” (Read, 13:45 -13:56)

Not all allegations of witchcraft were allied with the objectivist criteria of deviance. In many instances, women accused of witchcraft did not fit these principles. While there were witches who were accused and murdered who were statistically rare in some facets, accusations often curtailed from social or gendered divergences, distrust, or capitalist motivations rather than statistical rarity.

Most witches did not cause any actual harm at all, they were simply scapegoats for tribulations outside the sphere of their power. Many women who were accused of witchcraft were productive members of society and contributed positively to their community, yet these women were perceived as threats to power structures and religious convention and were besieged due to their non-conformist spiritual practices. This dichotomy emphasises the ironies and discrepancies of witchcraft allegations throughout history. While some cases align with objectivist criteria of deviance, many do not. Indictments of witchcraft were often motivated by societal, cultural, and dogmatic factors rather than objective evaluations of deviant behaviour.

Silvia Federici offers enormous insight into a subjectivist way of thinking, especially regarding the historical transition from feudalism to capitalism. Her interest was to understand how this social construction had developed. She began to “re-think the feudal mode of production.” (Federici, 9:19 – 9:27) She says that “we are rarely told that there was a tremendous class struggle taking place in the feudal world and that it was by virtue of this struggle that

feudalism by the 14th and 15th Centuries entered a terminal crisis. The feudal class could not reproduce itself.” (Federici, 11:40 – 12:10).

The witch persecutions played a crucial role in paving the way for the ascendant capital order by challenging the Church, calling for a strike on the level of procreation. The Catholic movement played into the development of the ideology of witchcraft, which brought more people into slavery. Federici highlights an imperative allegory by saying “the act of procreation being the act by which the soul becomes entrapped into the body is a metaphor for entrapment into societies where people were obviously still enslaved.” (Federici, 15:49 – 16:05). She says that she does not think that “you can find in any society, in any other historical moment, no such a gender specific persecution.” (Federici, 18:04 – 18:15).

But it is not just the gender that we must consider when relating the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The witches were persecuted primarily because they were “beggars.” This speaks to Marx’s primitive accumulation, the moment when capitalism must amass. Federici points out that during the witch hunts, it was about the land and bodies of the workers. In her book, “*Caliban and the Witch*,” she explores how the witch hunt has a direct correlation to the accumulation of workers. “The Great Transformation” of capitalism drove Federici to find three types of crimes “that are recurrent which have a correspondence in the transformation that was promoted by the new capitalist class.” (Federici, 32:49 – 33:05). Stealing, begging, and cursing. She states that “people are not born beggars” (Federici, 36:54 – 36:55), and that in the 16th and 17th Century, poverty becomes a mass phenomenon, and women are the ones being accused. The more bodies, the more capital. During the witch hunt, any practice that is deemed

as interfering with production is seen as demonic. I would agree that this is very much connected with economic and social life, and the relation between population and economic growth.

Through description, one labels an individual based on “an observed or presumed behaviour or characteristic.” (Bereska, p.19). This is to categorize someone as a “noun.” (Bereska, p.19). In the context of the witch persecutions, accused witches were described as old, poor, single, midwives, or healers. Therefore, they were perceived as direct threats to social order. In the documentary, *The Burning Times*, Margo Adler explains how these pagan people made their “rituals and celebrations as things that were important because they were part of life experience. They really didn’t have a lot to do with belief. They are based on action, experience, celebration and custom.” (Read, 17:10 – 17:34). Unfortunately, this did not stop the Institution from labelling them as “evil,” or “satanists.”

Evaluation occurs when “a judgment is attached to the individual by virtue of the label that was previously given or the category that individual was placed in under the description component.” (Bereska, p.19). This is evident by how the Church reacted to and hence, judged these women for their spiritual practices. “If someone is socially typed as deviant, this judgment is negative in nature.” (Bereska, p.19).

This leads to prescription, the third component of the social typing process. “Because of the label that has been given and the resulting judgment that occurs, the individual is treated in a specific way – a way in which person would not be treated if the initial label had not been applied.” (Bereska, p.20). Therefore, anyone labelled a “witch” would receive radically different treatment by the public than those without this description.

In conclusion, the witch hunts have a direct correlation between capitalism and patriarchy because of poverty, the social typing process, and the rise of Christianity. The witch hunts drove the world into mass consumption, equating bodies with wealth, and the female sexuality labelled as sinful. Guilt and sin were now part of every Christian's life. Sexuality was no longer a gift, but the root of all evil. Woman was the obstacle to man's holiness. Historian Irving Smith says that "it is woman who is the cause of the Fall. We get it in the New Testament and in the writings of St. Paul. It is the woman who introduces us to sin, who is the temptress. In a patriarchal society, women becoming "independent" is very difficult to come to grips with." (Read, 28:05 – 28:27). Unfortunately, this is still the case today. As Silvia Federici mentions the time Virginia Woolf visited the library wanting to read about the history of women and finding shelves either "completely empty" or shelves written by men about women." (Federici, 20:52 – 21:11).

Women are a threat to our capitalist society and the witch hunts are direct proof of that. Federici offers the illusion of relief by saying "sometimes I would say to myself: well at least today we do not have witch hunts.' But I was wrong. Over the last 25 years, we have seen a return of witch hunting. In many parts of Africa and the tribal areas of India, Papua New Guinea, thousands upon thousands of women are being killed and tortured for being witches." (Federici, 51:55 – 52:55). Therefore, the evangelical sect has reinjected into the religious discourse the notion of the devil and demonization into our present-day forces.

Bibliography

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