

Understanding the witch trials is a vital part of understanding the rise of capitalism, the family, women's roles and our relation to our bodies. Their deep importance and impact is too often neglected in even radical histories.

This brief overview looks at the economic, social and ideological reasons for, and effects of, the massacre of women that took place during the rise of capitalism.

With these words, Past Tense publications released *Burning Women*. While brief and somewhat scattered, it is nonetheless an illuminating essay that merits a close reading by anarchists and other folks who seek to unmask and confront the institutions of modern misery and gain insight into working on our own shit. Historical writing such as this (and the recommended readings) may prove more helpful in these regards than fashionably obtuse ivory tower bullshit, or a hundred guilt-ridden counter-essentialist leftist rags.

We re-issue this text in a new edition as a beginning step to understanding the significance of the witch trials. We undertake this not as a matter for mere study or as a historical curiosity: by tracing the threads of modern hierarchies and alienations to their relative origins we aspire to open up invigorating new terrains for discussion, action, regeneration of our own powers, and contestation in any of a variety of creative expressions. This piece serves to whet the appetite for deeper explanations of where we are, and how we came to be here. A fruitful reading may explode your notions of the possible.



# BURNING WOMEN



The European Witch Hunts, Enclosure,  
and the Rise of Capitalism

Lady Stardust

During the 16th and 17th century, all across Europe, in every town and village, women were killed, en masse, as witches. In some towns there were a few killed every week, in some towns hundreds killed in one go. The killings went on for two centuries and touched everyone's lives. They spread fear, destroyed networks and resistance and did not stop until the population was sufficiently subordinated and the emerging state, capitalist social relations and church had got its claws into the lives and psyches of the people. Not only is the deep significance of the witch trials glossed over in mainstream history, it is glossed over in Marxist and anarchist history too. Where it is discussed the gender implications are not brought to the fore.

This text is a small step to redressing the balance. It has a bit of historical background of the times, then how the witch trials happened, and then some explanations for and effects of the trials: Changes in methods of social control; Independent women as a threat; Reconstructing women's sexuality; Wise women, healers, midwives and the rise of science; Older women and the rise of private property; Organised women, organised resistance.



inc. fortune telling.

1572 First local tax to fund poor relief in UK

1588 The Spanish Armada is smashed by Sir Francis Drake

1589 Knitting Machine (stocking frame), invented by Reverend William Lee

1601 Poor Law introduced. The poor would be provided for, but also forced to work, including Children.

1602 Dutch East India Company was created by Antwerp merchants, a new style of colonial expansion based on return on investment shareholders (as opposed to royal families).

1604 Official discovery of the circulation of blood

1604 Witchcraft punishable by death - even if no damage done, in UK

1605 Bacon publishes 'advancement of learning'

1609 Invention of compound microscope

1618 1648 Europe was convulsed by the Thirty Years' War

1620 The Pilgrim Fathers sailed to America in the Mayflower

1630-1750 40 % of rural English population left the land to move to the cities

1642-1651 The English Civil War

1649 The Diggers of St Georges Hill

1653-1660 Oliver Cromwell introduced the "Instrument of Government", the Protectorate.

1662 Settlement Act or Poor Relief act

1680 Clock with Minute Hands invented

1683 Discovery of bacteria

1723 the Workhouse Test Act

1736 Death penalty for witchcraft was abolished in England

1749 The last trial for witchcraft in Germany at Würzburg,

1783 Last legal execution of a witch in Switzerland, in the Protestant Canton of Glarus



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# Timeline

- 1347-1352 Bubonic plague pandemic claimed a third of the population of Europe, 25 million people
- 1381 Third Poll Tax and Peasants Revolt: Wat Tyler marched on London in protest against the poll tax.
- 1387 "Canterbury Tales" by Chaucer published, containing the first description of a medical practitioner.
- 1401 Statute of Heresy: heretics were to be imprisoned and or burned alive
- 1429 Joan of Arc leads the French to victory against the English in the Hundred Years' War.
- 1434 Crushing of the Taborites
- 1440 Johann Gutenberg and others refine the technology of printing books with movable type presses
- 1463 First Import controls. Woollen clothes, silk and embroidery, leather and metal goods etc controlled
- 1477 William Caxton set up a printing press in the precincts of Westminster Abbey
- 1484 Malleus Maleficarum published
- 1492 After almost 800 years of thriving multiculturalism, Jews and Muslims are expelled from Southern Spain in 1492
- 1492 Christopher Columbus reaches the Caribbean. Then South America in 1498.
- 1500 1660 Growth of London by 400% to 200,000
- 1500 1525 Peasant wars in Germany.
- 1500 1550 Price Revolution drops real wages by sixty percent
- 1502 Pocket Watch, invented by Peter Henlein
- 1517 Lutheran Reformation in Germany
- 1520 1550 Dramatic increase in rents in England
- 1529 The Ottoman Empire reached as far as Vienna
- 1532 Witchcraft becomes punishable by death in UK
- 1532 Witchcraft a criminal offence punishable by burning throughout the Holy Roman Empire (including Germany) with Charles V's law, Constitutio Criminalis Carolina
- 1534 King becomes supreme head of the Church of England
- 1535 End of the Anabaptist rule of Munster, "the new Jerusalem"
- 1549 Agrarian revolts spread across England
- 1552 Parishes in the UK began to register those considered 'poor'.
- 1556 1560 A bout of plague in England
- 1564 William Shakespeare, English playwright and poet, born
- 1568-1648 Dutch independence from Spain
- 1572 Augustus of Saxony imposed the penalty of burning for witchcraft of every kind,

37 - Thomas, p. 556.

38 - Rosalind Miles (1989) *The Women's History of the World*.

39 - Ehrenreich and English.

40 - Federici, p. 165.

41 - Federici, p. 165.

42 - Federici, p. 170.

43 - Lebohang Letsie talking about the domestic killings in Botswana, 2006. For more on witch-hunts in the colonies, see Federici.

Thanks M & C, x.

## Recommended further reading

Silvia Federici; *Caliban and the Witch; Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation; Autonomedia; 2004*

Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English; *Witches, Midwives and Nurses, A History of Women Healers; 1973*

Keith Thomas; *Religion and the Decline of Magic; Penguin Books; 1971*

Maria Mies; *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a world Scale; Women in the Global Division of Labour; Zed Books; 1986*

Rosalind Miles; *The Women's History of the World; Paladin; 1989*

## Introduction

"The number of witches and sorcerers has everywhere become enormous. This kind of people within these last few years are marvellously increased", wrote Bishop Jewel in 1559. And "The land is full of witches. They abound in all places and would in short time overrun the whole land" claimed Chief Justice Anderson in 1602.[2]

In England, about a quarter of all criminal trials from the early sixteenth to the end of the seventeenth century were witch trials, and most who were accused, died. It is hard to get figures of exactly how many women were killed, but likely hundreds of thousands, at a time when the population of Europe was smaller than it is now [3]. Neither the witch trials, nor the idea of the witch being evil, existed before this phase. In the UK witchcraft became punishable by death in 1532. Between this date and 1066 there were only six recorded executions of witches and those were treason cases. It died down again in the 18th Century, with witchcraft no longer being a crime in most of Europe by the mid 17 hundreds. The most intense phase was 1580 to 1630 during the decline of feudal relations, the rise of 'mercantile capitalism', increasing migration and day labouring. The trials were no hang-over from medieval times, but part of the project of the rise of capitalism and the 'enlightenment'.

Witch executions were used by sections of the ruling class around Europe to variously; confiscate property, demonise beggars, control reproduction, enforce social control and gender roles and exclude women from economic, political and social activity. The trials were used not only to break up old communal forms of life and condemn some traditional practices, but was also a weapon by which resistance to social and economic restructuring could be defeated. The phenomena spread over so long, and such a huge area that there is no one single explanation for the trials. However - the differing explanations do not contradict each other, but rather show how widely the tool of the witch-hunts was used.

The witches were lower class. Most of the women accused were poor peasant women, and the accusers were either members of the clergy, or wealthy members of that same community - often their employers or landlords.

The witches were women. There existed men practicing all sorts of magic and healing, but they were not killed. Jean Bodin, supposed figure of the 'enlightenment' and a French author of a witch finder's manual set the ratio of women to men as 50 to 1. In

England 90% of those killed were women, and most men killed were the husbands of accused women.

The phenomenon was Europe-wide; represents a deep philosophical, social and political shift in society; and was undeniably orchestrated by the authorities at the highest level. However - in seeming contrast to the scale and depth of the phenomenon, the actual trials concern daily life and village level issues. The accusation was witchcraft, but the crimes were causing milk to curdle, stealing apples, helping a neighbour give birth, or making certain herbal teas. The trials show how the deep and broad power shifts in European history, were carried out on a village level, against the daily practices of peasant women. The affects were so fundamental that we feel their affects on our gender and class relations today.

## Historical Background: Enclosures, the rise of capitalism, the church and the state

### *The Middle Ages*

During the middle-ages (more or less the 12th to the early 15th century) Europe was largely characterised, in the countryside, by a feudal system with villagers having a subsistence plot of land, some common land and having to work on the landlord's fields by way of rent and tax. There were also handicrafts in the towns with concentrations of thousands of day-labourers in some trades and women working in all sorts of trades and crafts and belonging to the respective guilds. The plague of 1347 - 1350 killed a third of the European population, leading to a huge labour shortage.

### *1400 - 1499*

During the 15th century the first signs of the changes begin with exploration of the 'new world' and new imports into Europe. The beginning of the new science and philosophy started. There were increasing schisms within the church and Heretic sects such as the Anabaptists and Taborites were challenging the hierarchy of the church and gaining popularity[4]. The inquisition started up as a tool of power by the church. There was an overall rise in the living conditions and the power of the working and peasant classes. Partly due to the labour shortage, people could drive a hard bargain for their labour and they achieved "a standard of living that remained unparalleled until the 19th century"[5]. The situation varied across Europe, but in general, after a number of open and unified offensives by the peasants, wages rose, or were introduced, peasants gained more

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24 - Quoted in Ehrenreich and English.

25 - For example, the English physicians sent a petition to Parliament requesting long imprisonments for "worthless and presumptuous women who usurped the profession" and attempted to "use the practice of Fisyk". See Ehrenreich and English.

26 - In the UK in recent years, a number of independent midwives have faced persecution by the medical establishment, with their case notes scrutinised with a fine toothcomb in the hope of finding some incriminating evidence against them. Insurance for independent midwives is set so high that it must be intended to discourage them from practicing outside of the control of the medical establishment. Midwives working within hospitals are covered by the hospital insurance. For more on current issues in midwifery in the UK, see the Association of Radical Midwives' website at <http://www.rad-mid.demon.co.uk>. In 2006 in the USA, a woman was prosecuted for manslaughter after giving birth to a stillborn baby because she was a drug addict. The US government is starting a campaign to make all women of childbearing age see themselves as 'pre-pregnant', whether or not they are planning to have a baby. They are urged, for example, not to drink or smoke in case they become pregnant—a campaign that encourages a view of women as walking wombs.

27 - There were also many superstitious beliefs at the time, including a widespread belief in the efficacy of magic spells but this should not make us ignore or ridicule the serious botanical, chemical and anatomical knowledge the healers clearly had.

28 - The physician to Edward II—who held a bachelor's degree in theology and a doctorate in medicine from Oxford—prescribed, for toothache, writing on the jaws of the patient the words, 'In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen', or touching a needle to a caterpillar and then to the tooth. A frequent treatment for leprosy was a broth made of the flesh of a black snake caught in a dry land among stones. See Ehrenreich and English.

29 - Quoted in Ehrenreich and English.

30 - For more on Bacon, contrast Thomas, p. 522 with the material at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis\\_Bacon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Bacon).

31 - Linebaugh (1975) *The Tyburn Riots against the Surgeons*, and *The London Hanged* (1992).

32 - Federici, p. 184.

33 - Keith Thomas deals with this at length in *Religion and the Decline of Magic*

34 - Quoted in Thomas.

35 - Maria Mies (1986) *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the Global Division of Labour*.

36 - Federici, p. 73.

9 - Significantly, the only known example of men as a group defending the women in their community was a group of fishermen from St Jean-de-Luz in the Basque country, who were at sea during the months of the propaganda phase. They heard about the witch trials of their wives and sisters, and immediately returned to successfully stop the process.

10 - Federici, p. 170.

11 - Jean Bodin (1580), quoted in Mary Daly (1978) *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, p. 182; and P. Hughes (1975) *Witchcraft*.

12 - Daly, p. 184.

13 - This and previous quotes from D. Underdown (1985) *The Taming of the Scold: Order and Disorder in Early Modern England*, p. 120 and elsewhere.

14 - Federici, p. 97.

15 - D. Underdown (1985).

16 - Quoted in Marianne Hester (1992) *Lewd Women and Wicked Witches: A Study of the Dynamics of Male Domination*

17 - Devil beliefs tend to appear with shifts from one mode of production to another. Ironically, in the Dracula myths and in much of South America, the poor suspected the rich of devil-worshipping. Money relations and the commodity seemed diabolical and unnatural compared to the old subsistence ways of life. For more on this, see Michael T. Taussig (1980) *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. Federici has found echoes of this phenomenon in modern Africa—see Federici, p. 239.

18 - Federici, p. 194.

19 - The history of prostitution and its relations to capitalism, sexuality, religion, witch trials and urbanisation is fascinating and complex, and deserves a pamphlet of its own. The State encourages prostitution at one moment as a comfort for angry men, a cure for homosexuality and a job for single women—to the point of opening state brothels; then the next moment demonises it, and blames the prostitutes.

20 - This and previous quote from M. Hester (1992).

21 - See also B. Ehrenreich and D. English (1973) *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, for a more detailed overview of this aspect of the trials.

22 - Thomas, p. 518.

23 - See Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1991).

autonomy and serfdom was all but abolished in most areas. There were also a notable gender imbalance. Some statistics from birth and death registers show women outnumbering men 110 or 120 to each 100.

The witch hunts of the 16th and 17th century were partly a ruling class offensive in response to the previous century of intense class struggle and resulting crisis of accumulation for the ruling class.

### *1500 - 1599*

During the 16th century many class uprising were crushed, such as the Peasant Wars in Germany or Agrarian Revolts in England. The battles going on within the church intensified, including the Reformations, protestant/catholic splits, the Lutherans, and various heretical, or radical-Christian sects. Although significantly - all the branches of the official Christian church were on the same side against the witches[6]. The state and the church were becoming more interlinked and more powerful and tied into the rise of universities and professions. Women were inevitably excluded from these new areas of power. This battle of church to gain control over all ideology, administrative functions and land takes in not only the witch trials, but also the inquisitions that targeted radicals, Jews, Muslims, scientists opposing the church and any other people seen as obstacles to church power.

During the 16th century some of the building blocks of global capitalism became established and accepted; the colonies were exporting more raw materials and slaves, boosting the growth of mercantile capitalism and establishing the north/south divide and the ideology of racism. The growth of cottage industries, migration and day labouring exacerbated the town/country divide and the gender division of labour. Money also took on a greater role both for the growing import/export companies and in people's daily lives. Partly fuelled by the introduction of gold and silver from the colonies, the first inflation occurred in the mid 16th century with consequent rise in food prices and starvation (and the first grain mountains stored to keep the food prices deliberately high).

### *1600 - 1699*

In the 17th century mercantile capitalism was booming, more and more land in America and Africa was being colonised and the cities were growing. There were huge shifts in science, medicine and philosophy and physicians became established professionals for the ruling and middle classes.

Enclosure and privatisation of land continued a-pace, along with increasing battles as people lost their means of subsistence and their rights to the use of the commons for

grazing animals or gathering wood or herbs[7]. These enclosures were part of the rise of the capitalist mode of production in the sense that people were forced to work for money and had to sell their labour (i.e. their bodies and time) as a commodity. Land was being enclosed all over England from the 15th to the 18th century, in some parts due to the sheep industry being more profitable than crops, but needing more land and less labour[8]. There was a growth of the towns, and sizable migrant or vagrant communities moving around, not always finding work, engaged in a chaotic mixture of wage work, begging and a significant amount of crime. These 'vagabonds' were harshly persecuted under a range of laws, including being publicly whipped or imprisoned. There was a criminalisation of 'the poor' that had been created by the changes. Amongst these vagabond, migrant communities criss-crossing Europe there was a large percentage of women - often being forced to leave their lands due to legal changes limiting women's rights to inherit land or property. Many moved to the towns working as in various manufacturing crafts or as maids, prostitutes, dancers or nurses.

## How the trials were executed

The witch hunts were organised, coordinated, multi-faceted systemic attacks. The church defined the problem with the witches, the doctors examined, tortured and condemned them, the lawyers pressed charges and oversaw legal proceedings, the state administrators organised the executions.

The first witch finder's manual, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (hammer of witches) was published in 1484 by two Dominican monks and spread widely throughout Europe. The rise of the printing press led to more anti-witch pamphlets and manuals being printed and many clerics, scholars and royalty also published their own texts, including King James and Jean Bodin.



The process of the trials started with a steady indoctrination by the authorities publicly expressing anxiety about the spread of witches. The plays, paintings, poems and religious texts of the time all help to build up the demonised stereotypes of the witches and spread the fear. Witch finders would travel from village to village with propaganda and notes on how to identify witches. Notes were pinned up that the witch finder was com-

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## Notes

- 1 - Gage, M. J. (1893) *Women, Church and State: The Original Exposé of Male Collaboration Against the Female Sex*.
- 2 - Quoted in Keith Thomas (1971) *Religion and the Decline of Magic*.
- 3 - Although there is much dispute about the number of women killed, 200,000 is a likely number. A lack of records and research projects makes it hard to be exact. For more discussion on this, see Silvia Federici (2004) *Caliban and the Witch*, p. 208; and Anne L. Barstow (1994) *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts*. In any case, the numbers are significant enough to demonstrate a Europe-wide, centuries-long reign of terror amongst all communities, with deep social and physiological impacts. For some idea of population figures in 1600: Germany and Austria, 13 million; Italy, 11 million; Spain, 9 million; present-day UK, 9 million.
- 4 - These groups were also mercilessly persecuted, and have a whole fascinating story of their own. They were typically against private property, and were in many ways the first anarchists. Some claim that the heretic movement was the first 'Proletarian International', with sects reaching far and wide and having international networks including those of trade, pilgrimages and cross-border refugees. For more on the fascinating history of this movement, see the recent novel *Q* by Luther Blisset (2004), which contains a history of the Anabaptists and other sects—but which, although a good book in many ways, does not make a single mention of the witch-hunts. For a good overview of the history of the Taborites, see Howard Kaminski, *A History of the Hussite Revolution*; and see H. C. Lea (1961) *The Inquisition of the Middle Ages* for information on many heretical sects. See also 'Neither mine nor thine: Communist experiments in Hussite Bohemia'. See an article by Kenneth Rexroth, which also covers the Brethren of the Free Spirit and the Peasants Uprising, at <http://www.bopsecrets.org/rexroth/communalism2.htm>. There is also a section in Fredy Perlman's *Against His-tory, Against Leviathan* covering the Taborites. The two articles mentioned above contain some inaccuracies and translation problems regarding the Adamites, but are still worth reading. The Perlman book goes the other way and probably over-romanticises them—and he doesn't include sources—but it makes for good reading and gives a good sense of the context. Finally, an interesting book that specifically focuses on women is *Warring Maidens, Captive Wives and Hussite Queens: Women and Men at War and at Peace in Fifteenth Century Bohemia*. Thanks, Rosanne!
- 5 - Silvia Federici (2004) *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, p. 47
- 6 - The Catholic Church has never apologised for this most horrendous massacre despite all the other things it has felt the need to apologise for over the years.
- 7 - See *Down With the Fences: Battles for the Commons in South London 2004*
- 8 - On the hazards of converting farmland to pastureland, see Thomas Moore's account of the man-eating sheep in *Utopia*, published in 1516.

our psyches to continue to justify on-going exploitation and oppression. The social, economic, and political exclusion enforced during this phase echoes on in the present. The story in this pamphlet is the 16th century European one, but the same story is told in North and South America during colonial times, in Africa both in the colonial times and again recently - along with the next round of enclosures brought about by the IMF's Structural Adjustment Programmes. Gender stereotypes and gender violence still go hand in hand all over the world today - with murder of women happening at "a dizzying rate" [43] . Any surprise about the complicity to the trials of the 16th and 17th century Europe, should make us question the complicity of current society to the deaths caused by war, capitalism and patriarchy today. We need to bring this subject to light in order to understand where we are today - the gendered origins of capitalism, and the capitalist origins of this current form of patriarchy. We can use the knowledge to make us stronger in the fight against the on-going repressions and in celebration of those women staying strong and fighting back, past present and future.

ing in, for example, two weeks and everyone was expected to start identifying who the local witches were. Refusing to co-operate could put your life in danger. Witches were accused in public and anyone trying to assist the woman would be immediately a suspect. This propaganda, together with a simple reign of terror lasting two hundred years, had an inestimable affect [9].

The trials were a farce with random evidence and almost no chance of acquittal. Torture was a huge part of the trials. James I: "Loath they are to confess without torture, which witnesses their guilt". This torture was severe and extremely sexually abusive. The crimes themselves were so inexact, indefinable and vague that we can see the parallels with 'terrorism' today. A vague, but very powerful, term that puts you beyond the rest of humanity and the expectation of humane treatment. Silvia Federici writes: "The very vagueness of the charge - the fact that it was impossible to prove it, while at the same time it evoked the maximum of horror - meant that it could be used to punish any form of protest and generate suspicion even towards the most ordinary aspects of daily life". [10]

In describing what the trials should be like Jean Bodin states: "The proof of such crimes is so obscure and so difficult that not one witch in a million would be accused or punished if the procedure were governed by the ordinary rules. He who is accused of sorcery should never be acquitted"[11].

The trials and executions, hangings or burnings were very public affairs with the whole community forced to attend - including, and sometimes especially, the daughters of the witches. The witch hunters would arrive in town with doctors, administrators, members of the clergy and executioners. The whole village would be expected to turn out in the town square, for a show trial - a grand affair culminating in executions. Absence or worse still, speaking against the trial or defending an accused would be taken as admission of guilt and your life would be at risk. The spiral of fear cannot be overestimated in towns where there were regular burnings of numbers of women lasting for years and years and years. These people were neighbours, friends and family. Reports of neighbours accusing each other were a reaction to the fear. This is a very different story to the 'witch craze' or communal psychoses explanation that is often given in mainstream history. The rest of this pamphlet looks at some causes for, and effects of, the witch-hunts. The witch-hunts were one of the mechanisms to control and subordinate women whose social and economic independence was a threat to the emerging social order. Mary Daly claims the witches were "women whose physical, intellectual, economic, moral and spiritual independence and activity profoundly threatened the male monopoly in every sphere"[12]. As women were excluded from economic and political life, ridicule and violence was used to enforce and justify the new gender relations.

## Indigestible independent women

Women who were too loud, too confident, or too angry were condemned. Reginald Scott declared "The chief fault of witches is that they are scolds". He is referring to women who speak back to their husbands or talk amongst themselves. A scold was defined as a woman who was "a troublesome and angry woman who doth break the public peace... and increase public discord". Faced with a campaign to exclude women from the workplace and developing professions, these stereotypes made it easier to attack women who fought this tendency and asserted their economic and social independence. It was a crime to be: a busy woman of the tongue, a maker of rhymes or nicknames or libellous, lascivious ballads.

One poem from 1630 reads:

"Ill fares the hapless family that shows  
A cock that's silent and a hen that crows.  
I know not which live more unnatural lives,  
Obedient husbands or commanding wives"

Or this one:

"But if, Amazon-like you attack your gallants,  
And put us in fear of our lives,  
You may do very well for your sisters and aunts,  
But believe me, you'll never be wives" [13]

But behind these comic poems a real and sinister gender war was taking place. Women's legal rights were being eroded to the point where across Europe they lost the right to own property or conduct any other economic activity, make independent legal contracts, or even in some cases, live alone. The ridicule of independent women could take the form of women being forced to wear a muzzle (or 'scolds bridle') in the streets.

This cultural campaign to ridicule and accuse independent women went along with the exclusion of women from wage work. This created a gender divide within the working class by offering men a better chance of finding work. In reality the work the men took on was often partly done by women, from home-based handicraft and up to the extent that husbands would get the wage for their wives' work, even for wet-nurses.

other means. We cannot fail to see a connections between the fear of uprisings and the prosecutors insistence on the witches Sabbat..." [40] Throughout this period any peasant gathering, festival or dance was described by the authorities as a virtual Sabbat. The witch-hunts crushed those who remembered the peasant wars, the struggles in defence of the commons, the riots and invasions against rising bread prices and would have remained to carry on the resistance. As the trials continued, the communities were robbed of the independent, strong, radical, rebellious women who would have served as role models and lead a fight back.

According to Silvia Federici: "What has not been recognised is that the witch-hunt was one of the most important events in the development of capitalist society and the formation of the modern proletariat. For the unleashing of a campaign of terror against women, unmatched by any other persecution, weakened the resistance of the European peasantry to the assault launched against it by the gentry and the state... The witch hunts deepened the division between women and men, destroyed a universe of practises, beliefs, and social subjects whose existence was incompatible with the capitalist work discipline" [41]. The witch trials worked to divide the class along gender lines by spreading fear and mistrust. "The years of propaganda and terror sowed amongst men the seeds of a deep psychological alienation from women, that broke class solidarity and undermined their own collective power... just as today, by repressing women the ruling class more effectively repressed the entire proletariat... If we consider the historical context in which the witch-hunt occurred, the gender and class of the accused, and the effects of the persecution, then we must conclude that the witch hunting in Europe was an attack on women's resistance of 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." [42]

## Conclusion

The witch trials enabled the enforcement of the gender division of labour, of the enclosures of land, of alienation from our bodies and especially our reproductive bodies, of the assumed norm of women as the weaker sex and the exclusion of women from social, economic, cultural and political spheres of influence. They introduced gender divides in the class, thereby helping crush class resistance to emerging capitalism.

The tactic of demonisation along with gender violence being used to break up communities, resistance to exploitation and foster class divides (gender divides and between sections of the class) has been used across centuries and around the world. Demonisation of 'negros' during the first phase of colonialisation played a similar function. Stereotypes are created and backed up by terror of violence to enable the expropriation of land, resources, bodies or time. The resulting deep-rooted sexism or racism remains in

turnal meetings, dances or feasts), were the meetings and festivals of these rebellious communities. Facing poverty and oppression these networks also became politicised and organised such as the women who "cast down fences and hedges" in Lincolnshire in 1608; those women who "took it upon themselves to assemble at night to dig up hedges and level the ditches" in 1608 in Warwickshire or those women who after destroying an enclosure in York in 1624 "enjoyed tobacco and ale after their feat" [36]. In France, women initiated revolts in Montpellier in 1645 and in Cordoba, Italy in 1652; women played a crucial role in the German Peasant wars in the 1520s and 30s and many women were part of the various Heretic sects.

The details of the trials show many women being accused of rebelling against members of the local ruling class. Such as those who were accused of rebelling against the village constable who was trying to get their sons to be soldiers; or against the overseer of the poor who put their children into compulsory service. Joan Peachy was accused of witchcraft in 1582 after complaining the poor relief collector gave her inferior bread. Or the trial of Margaret Harkett in 1585:

"William Goodwin's servant denied her yeast, whereupon his brewing stand dried up. She was struck by a bailiff who had caught her taking wood from the master's grounds; the bailiff went mad... A gentleman told his servant to refuse her buttermilk; after which they were unable to make butter". [37]

Other women were accused after retaliating against the local tyrants, against enclosures and shutting rights of way. The real covens were not cultish religious devil worship, but dissident underground groups of women (or mixed groups) - pissed off, disenfranchised and angry.

The authorities were terrified of self-organised groups and networks. In 1920 Montague Summers, translator of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, wrote "The witches were a vast political movement, an organised society, which was anti-social and anarchical, a world wide plot against civilisations" [38]. Then - just as now - it was the witch hunters who were the organised anti-social plots of terror; a "calculated ruling class campaign of terrorisation ... well organised, initiated, financed and executed by Church and State". [39]

The phase before the height of the witch trials was politically explosive all over Europe. The birth of the new order was, as ever, a bloody process. There were the peasant wars in Germany, the growth and crushing of the Heretical sects or radical Christian groups. There were the battles against the enclosures in England, the revolt of the Croquants in France against tithes, taxes and the price of bread. In all these struggles women played a central role. They were an integral part of the communities being attacked, and an integral part of the struggle against those attacks. The trials were a "class war carried out by



Referring to both the way the authorities encouraged this exclusion of women from a wage, and the domestic and manufacturing work that women were indeed doing, Silvia Federici explains:

"It was from this alliance between the crafts and the urban authorities, along with the continuing privatization of land, that a new sexual division of labor...was forged, defining women in terms - mothers, wives, daughters, widows - that hid their status as workers, whilst giving men free access to women's bodies, their labor, and the bodies and labor of their children." [14] She claims that the sexual division of labour was a power relation which was a cornerstone of the process of primitive accumulation and the development of capitalism. The witch hunts backed up this cultural and economic oppression with the ever-present threat of execution for non-compliants.

## Social control - from village to state

The change from close-knit village life shifted the patriarchal social control from village-level cultural oppression, to state-level laws.

Village life before the witch hunts was not at all some kind of rural paradise. There was a lot of social control and many gender divisions, but the close-knit nature of the communities meant that the social control was an internal matter. Anti-social behaviour was dealt with by ostracising or ridicule such as the 'rough music' played outside disruptive community members houses. There was very little tolerance of non-conformity and all life was played out in public. "In England, every citizen is bound by oath to keep a sharp eye on his neighbours' house as to whether the married people live in harmony"[15]. The intense economic interdependence of the communities ensured a high level of social cohesion and the landlord would often play the role of enforcer of the local status quo.

Over the 16th and 17th Century, communities were breaking up due to enclosures, migration, the rise of individual private property (exacerbated by the increase of the use of money as a means of exchange) and the rise of wage work. Women were increasingly excluded from economic and social life and their role was more defined. Social control moved away from the village into the domain of the authorities. As people became more like isolated economic units the need to conform on a social level decreased, so the organised social control increased. This phase of history is the first time Europe experiences an organised, networked and far-reaching 'authority' with legal, economic, spiritual and moral arms.

yet instantly returned, and with the like look and silence departed. At which doing the bread which she was chewing fell out of Mary Glover's mouth, and she herself fell backwards off the stool where she sat, into a grievous fit".[34]

The trials allowed for the development of the capitalist mentality of private property and wealth, as those previously provided for as part of the whole, become beggars asking for charity. Widows being excluded from feasts and the like are the origin of fairy tales such as sleeping beauty. Women became the scapegoats for all sorts of ills - deaths, crop failure, animal disease etc. and a way of the emerging middle class ensuring a bigger share of scarce resources.

In other areas, the trials could also be used to other ends, such as enabling the authorities to confiscate any property or wealth the women had - explaining the numbers of economically independent women killed. Maria Mies claims that the money made was much more significant than we assume, and sites this letter from Bailiff Geiss to Lord Lindheim:

"If only your lordship would be willing to start the burning, we would gladly provide the firewood and bear all other costs, and your lordship would earn so much that the bridge and also the church could be well repaired. Moreover, you would get so much that you could pay your servants a better salary in the future, because one could confiscate whole houses and particularly the more well to do ones".[35]

Money was also made by the witch finders taking bribes to not accuse people, and the various executioners, hunters, administrators etc were all paid. The documents of the expenses of the trials include the wood, the torture instruments and the beer for the witch trial team. In Ireland particularly, some richer women were killed, were eventually the ruling class got nervous and stopped supporting the trials.

## Organized women, organized resistance

The trials targeted rebellious women and groups that were part of the general high level of class resistance to the economic restructuring, at a village or regional level. They also broke class resistance by creating a gender divide. The witch-hunts may have been, in part, a ruling-class offensive in response to the previous century's intense class struggles and the resulting crisis of accumulation for the ruling class.

Women, of course, were part of groups and networks; sharing herbs, knowledge, skills, comradeship and friendship. One of the main accusations was of being part of an organised rebellion; and to be sure these women were. And the infamous sabbats, (noc-

## Older women and the rise of private property

The witch trials were used: to demonise begging women, thereby alleviating guilt amongst richer members of the same community; to expropriate the property of single women; and to deal with any resistance or crime that was a reaction to the increasing poverty.

The economic situation was dire for many people by the mid 16th century as bread prices rose and people were forced off their subsistence plots and commons. Women were forced to beg or steal to provide for themselves and their children. The correlation between the enclosures and the witch trials is shown by the fact that in England, most of the witch trials occurred in Essex where most of the land had been enclosed, whereas in the Scottish Highlands, where the communal life continued, there is no evidence of witch hunting. The increasing use of money exacerbated class divides, forcing some people off their land, and making small entrepreneurs out of others. There is a clear correlation between number of witch trials and the rise in food prices - possible causes being the trials as a reaction to revolts against food prices, and/or competition for scarce resources.

Many of those murdered were widows. In England there were changes in the law around this time regarding women and property - widows now got one third of the husband's land, not all of it. In Italy even this one third was taken away from widows, forcing them to become vagrants and beggars. Rented property did not typically pass to the widow. The English Poor Laws stigmatised the poor, banned begging without permission and later said that each parish should be responsible for its own poor, and residency had to be proved by birth, marriage or apprenticeship. Those who could not prove residency would be forcibly removed - often 100s of miles. This was much to the detriment of those forced to migrate, especially as the richer towns were stricter on their residency controls.

Witches were accused of "going from house to house for a pot full of milk, yeast, pottage or some other relief, without which they could hardly live". Accusing someone as a witch could alleviate the guilt and responsibility to provide for dependant neighbours[33]. The feeling of having a curse could be the guilt and tension of neglecting and condemning members of your community. In many of the trials the accuser had actually wronged the woman previously e.g. refusing charity to her.

For example: "The old woman had passed by the door, where the girl was eating a new wheaten loaf. She looked earnestly upon Mary, but, speaking nothing, passed by; and

Over this period, along with the physical enclosure of common land, came a series of laws and changes in custom that hindered or forbid the old forms of communal social life, fun, entertainment and celebration that had often taken place on those commons. Old forms of communal celebration were taken over by church rituals, transforming group festivals, parties, dances and orgies into hierarchical, dull, guilt- and duty-ridden affairs.

## Reconstructing women's sexuality

One of the outcomes of the witch trials was changing the view of women's sexuality and gender characteristic from powerful to powerless. Prior to this period women were more equal actors in the sexual relations, represented as lusty, predatory and sexually powerful (if still often evil). In over half the trials women are accused of some sexual crime such as sex outside marriage, sex with the devil, sex with animals etc. The demonising of women's independent or non-procreative sexuality provided the construct for the development of the nuclear family and the woman and the property of her husband.

Some of the most bizarre stuff on women's sexuality comes from the *Malleus Malificarum*, such as: "And what then is to be thought of those witches who collect male organs in great numbers together, and put them in a bird's nest, or shut them up in a box where they more themselves like living members and eat oats and corn as has been seen by many and is a matter of common report?" Or "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which in women is insatiable" [16].

The last quote portrays women as sexually active and aggressive; men would accuse women of bewitching them into sex, thereby justifying rape or getting out of unwanted affairs or pregnancies. This is in contrast to the later stereotype of submissive and weak women, fully developed by the end of the witch trials. The witch-hunts provoked a fear of the powerful woman, then used the pact with the devil to ridicule that power. The process of the trials succeeded in transforming the idea of women's sexuality from dangerous - but active and powerful - to weak and powerless. The devil became the main sexual actor - seducing and controlling weak women and demoting their power to being the servant of the single powerful male, the devil.

The whole concept of the devil as an all-powerful entity was introduced at this time [17]. Prior to that he was a sort of mischievous, but relatively powerless troublemaker. To introduce a male, singular dominating evil fitted the new image of women as submissive to male power; one husband, one god, one devil. The power and agency of women

was denied as they became servants of the devil.

The construct developed during this period of the submissive wife and mother has lasted to this day and serves the capitalist mode of production providing unpaid mother, carer and worker - producing and reproducing labour power. The woman, her children and her work became the property of her husband.

All non-procreative forms of female sexuality were demonised such as post-menopausal women's sexuality, lesbian and gay sex, prostitution, sex between young and old, collective sex (such as the spring festivals) or sex using contraception. Federici states: "The witch-hunt condemned female sexuality as the source of every evil, but it was also the main vehicle of a broad reconstruction of sexual life that, conforming with the new capitalist work-discipline, criminalised any sexual activity that threatened procreation, the transmission of property within the family, or took time and energy away from work" [18].

Prostitution became illegal for the first time during this period and many prostitutes were burned as witches [19]. They were economically and sexually independent women that did not fit the new model. Adultery was made punishable by death, and birth out of wedlock was made illegal.

Post-menopausal women were often killed as witches and the new stereotype of the old hag - desperate, horny, but repulsive, was constructed in stark contrast to the revered and cared-for wise woman or crone. With the break down of communal life and the beginnings of the nuclear family the status of the 'elderly relatives' were demoted. In the middle ages both the wise woman and the prostitute were considered positive social figures, but then demonised for their non-procreation sex.

Lesbians were also accused, such as the trial of Elizabeth Bennet: "William Bonner saith, that Elizabeth Bennet and his wife were lovers and familiar friends and did accompanies much together". When the wife dies, Elizabeth is accused of "clasping her in her arms and killing her". Prior to this phase the word 'gossip' simply meant friend, but as women's relations with each other were seen as suspect, the word became an insult. In 1576 Margaret Belsed of Boreham was condemned for "being a witch and not living with her husband"[20].

In contrast to the rise of the policing of private and sexual behaviour, the radical heretics such as the Taborites, the Brethren of the Free Spirit and the Anabaptists were often against the institutions of marriage in so far as the love of people was an act and thing in and of itself, much as the communion with God was.

pharmacology and anatomy. Paracelsus, often claimed to be the father of modern medicine, said in 1527 that he "learned from the sorceress all he knew" [29]. The myth of the enlightenment as modern men bringing rationality and empiricism has to be criticised when viewed through the lens of the witch hunts.

Many men so praised as the fathers of modern science were deeply involved in the witch-hunts, for example Richard Boyle, Thomas Hobbes and Francis Bacon who exposed the evil of witches alongside his more famous 'scientific rationality'[30]. Witchcraft and texts such as the *Malleus Maleficarum* which seem so ludicrous now, were still being seriously discussed by these 'rational' men in academia right up until the end of the 18th century. Those men advocating really empirical science such as Galileo or Copernicus were accused of heresy. The church's position was against the lay healers and common magic, and against some of the new scientists; it was faith alone that one should rely on, as the 'senses were the devils playground' and only god's representative could work miracles. Many scientists and philosophers, such as those in the Royal Society, managed to both appease the church and develop modern ideas, and it was these men most complicit in the witch-hunts.

More evidence of the brutality of the birth of modern science and medicine is witnessed in the torture chambers of the witch hunts, which served as medical laboratories and were overseen by physicians, and in the human dissections. Public hangings would be followed by a battle over the corpse as family members attempted to save it from the surgeons and their degrading public autopsies.[31]

Knowledge is power, and that power was in the hands of working- or peasant class women. The monopoly on the treatment and theory—and therefore control of the body—was being contested. The new philosophies and sciences of the time were constructing a new view of the body as a machine to be controlled (by the mind, by work, by the State, or by the doctors). The new forms of work and social relations wanted to control bodies, especially those of females, who should produce the next generation from their bodies, be available for and controlled by their husbands, and make their bodies dispensable to the new systems by losing control of their knowledge of them. Waged labour introduced the divide between 'work' and other activity, making it clear that our bodies are at the boss's disposal during work time. Silvia Federici writes, 'Just as the Enclosures expropriated the peasantry from the communal land, so the witch-hunt expropriated women from their bodies, which were thus "liberated" from any impediment preventing them functioning as machines for the production of labour. For the threat of the stake erected more formidable barriers around women's bodies than were ever erected by the fencing off of the commons.'[32]

reproduction meant alienating women from their own bodies and controlling when, where and how many children women had, and when and where they had them.

In fact, it would be another hundred years or more before the male doctors truly had a monopoly on attending births. In the seventeenth century, surgeons started delivering babies using forceps, and women were banned from practicing surgery. By the eighteenth century most births were attended by physicians, and when female midwives in England organised and charged the male intruders with commercialism and dangerous misuse of the forceps, they were easily put down as ignorant 'old wives', clinging to the superstitions of the past. It was the process of the witch trials had sown the seeds of this attitude.

In 16th century France and Germany midwives became obliged to report to the state all births, including concealed births. Today it is illegal not to register births in most of Europe. There is currently much control by the authorities over reproduction ranging from the Catholic prohibition on contraception and pregnancy terminations, to the state-run birth control programmes in China, to enforced sterilisation in some export processing zones, to the aborting of female foetuses in the patriarchal society of India. The extent to which birth is medicalised and seen in terms of risk and the faith we have in the magical-seeming powers of the doctor and hospital (despite our frequent disappointments in the medical establishment) is still testimony to this battle.[26]

## The rise and destruction of science

The destruction of the healers and midwives went hand in hand with the rise of the new 'rationality'. These new scientists were totally complicit in the witch trials, which, far from being a hang-over from a time of magic and superstition, were largely a campaign carried out by these same men of the enlightenment. The context was a battle for 'truth', the concept of control over the natural world, the acceptance of hierarchy as 'natural' and the mind / body split so useful for capitalism.

Ironically, much of the healers' knowledge was empirical, using cause and effect and experimentation, which we now are told is the result of modern science and represent progress from the supposedly superstitious belief systems of the middle ages [27]. Huge amounts of knowledge of herbalism, passed on by generations of women was lost during the trials. This was literally centuries of developed knowledge and practice and herbalists are now working hard to reclaim and rediscover this knowledge. The male scientists at the time were basing their knowledge on philosophy and clerical studies [28]. The healers on the other hand had a knowledge of chemistry, botany, natural science,

## Wise women and healers

Prior to this period, health was the domain of peasant-class women healers, and there were women within each community with huge amounts of knowledge and skills. The subject of health featured in many of the trials — for example, in instances of women curing someone and that person then becoming ill again, or indeed, becoming well. Magic was deemed to be the domain of the Church, and healing the domain of the medical establishment. The witch trials succeeded in effectively wiping out huge amounts of traditional knowledge, and thereby wresting control over the human body from the poor communities. [21]

The healers were skilled practitioners benefiting from generations of accumulated anatomical and herbal knowledge. The very fact of attempting to cure, or to affect health or the natural world, was viewed as witchcraft if practiced by women, whether it helped people or not. It was irrelevant whether the person got better, got worse or was not affected at all by the acts of the woman accused. In 1548, Reginald Scott said 'At this day it is indifferent to say in the English tongue, "she is a witch or she is a wise woman"'. [22]

All healing was considered a kind of miracle, and the female healers also used a superstitious spells and charms. Over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, magic and miracles became the sole domain of God and the Church, or else of the Devil, and thus people's magic was denied or viewed as diabolical.[23] One witch-finding manual stated: "in the same number we reckon all good Witches, which do no hurt but good, which do not spoil and destroy, but save and deliver ... It were a thousand times better for the land if all Witches, but especially the blessing Witch, might suffer death".[24] The work of wise men and magicians was discredited or blamed, but they were not killed. Even now, the word 'wizard' means an expert in something (e.g. a 'financial wizard'), whereas 'witch' is seen as a derogatory term.

The Church found some equilibrium with the growing number of university-trained physicians who were increasingly employed by the ruling classes, enforcing certain conditions such as the presence of a priest.

This growing medical profession very purposefully excluded women, including urban-educated women healers, long before the witch-hunts began.[25] The male, university-taught physicians were on the increase, and some see the witch trials as attempts to wipe



out the competition. The belief in witches also served to cover up for doctors' incompetence. For example, there was little knowledge of cancer or strokes, so it was easy for doctors to blame unexplainable deaths on the work of a witch. The Church-doctor-witch dynamic is clearly explained by Ehrenreich and English: "The partnership between Church, State and medical profession reached full bloom in the witch trials. The doctor was held up as the medical "expert", giving an aura of science to the whole proceeding. He was asked to make judgments about whether certain women were witches and whether certain afflictions had been caused by witchcraft. In the witch-hunts, the Church explicitly legitimised the doctors' professionalism, denouncing nonprofessional healing as equivalent to heresy: "If a woman dare to cure without having studied she is a witch and must die." The distinction between "female" superstition and "male" medicine was made final by the very roles of the doctor and the witch at the trial ... It placed him on the side of God and Law, a professional on par with lawyers and theologians, while it placed her on the side of darkness, evil and magic. He owed his new status not to medical or scientific achievements of his own, but to the Church and State he served so well ... Witch hunts did not eliminate the lower class woman healer, but they branded her forever as superstitious and possibly malevolent."

## Birth and midwives

"No-one does more harm to the Catholic Church than midwives", stated the *Malleus Maleficarum*, and the Papal Bull of 1484 wrote "witches destroy the offspring of women... They hinder men from generating and women from conceiving". All sexual health work; midwifery, contraception or termination of pregnancies was condemned. This is again about control over the body - and especially the female body and reproduction.

At the time capital and the state were particularly concerned with birth rates. They wanted labour and saw big populations as the sign of a wealthy nation. The population was low due to the plagues and wars and the authorities were worried about demographic collapse. Therefore they were anti-abortion and anti-contraception (the fairy tales of witches killing children and babies stem from this campaign). Many of the first witches burned were engaged in this work and there is plenty of evidence that women were indeed controlling the birth rates within their communities during the middle ages. They authorities didn't want the control of reproduction in the hands of lower class women themselves, and the witch trials were partly a battle to snatch this knowledge, which had previously been a 'female mystery'. Women's ability to control their reproduction was hugely diminished, and as midwives and groups of women were excluded from the birth process, the communities were robbed of their own tradition of knowledge. In so far as children are the products of women's labour - control over