

'To Create & Maintain Their Wealth'

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The history of accumulation from another perspective

Normally, industrialisation and capitalism (as well as the class relations generated in their womb) are explained to us through the figure of production and wage labour. This approach ignores and mutes the role of millions of subjects whose labour-power has also been used for accumulation; *and whose exploitation and resistance has also formed part of the story*. On the one hand, we are talking about non-human animals and their unpaid work, essential for the development of major industries and the generation of wealth; on the other hand, we refer to women relegated to the caregiver/reproductive role, carefully designed to ensure the continuity of the system and discourage any hint of dissent or solidarity.

Although we cannot aspire in these lines to a comprehensive analysis of the issue and its nuances, we would like to throw together some of the key proponents as proposed by the author Silvia Federici and the historian Jason Hribal.

The first delves into the roots of the State and economic control over the feminine body and social role, dating back to the post-colonial American witch hunts [*ed. – and much before*]. **For Federici, the capitalist system is not a logical evolution of society, but a plan carried out in a calculated manner for a few to create and maintain their wealth and privileges. In this regard, criminalising sexual and reproductive freedom meant creating a break from the norm of the time and, simultaneously, neutralising experiences of self-organisation and social functions of some women who could be possessors of knowledge linked to respect for nature and the community. Thus, any possible resistance to the necessary social transformation for the emergence and development of capitalism was annihilated or contained.** Women were gradually set aside from productive economic activities and, when waged work became the main source of wealth, women's bodies began to be conceived of as reproductive machines for the creation of the future labour force. At the same time, unpaid housework accounted for the livelihood and the daily reward for the existing [male] labour force: *“capital has made and makes money out of our cooking, smiling, fucking.”* (Federici, 1975).

Also profitable to the bosses and to the system in general was all the energy produced by non-human animals. In his work, Hribal shows to what extent these were depended on during industrialisation: *“On the agricultural farms, it was oxen, horses, mules, and donkeys, as well as the occasional cow, ewe, or large dog, which pulled and powered the plows, harrows, seed-drills, threshers, binders, presses, reapers, mowers, and harvesters. In the mines, they towed the gold, silver, iron-ore, lead, and coal. On the cotton plantations and in the spinning factories, they turned the mechanical mills that cleaned, pressed, carded, and spun the cotton. On the sugar plantations, they crushed and transported the cane. On the docks, roads, and canals, they moved the carts, wagons, and barges of mail, commodities, and people. In the cities, they powered the carriages, trams, buses, and ferries. On the battlefields, they deployed the artillery and supplies, they provided the reconnaissance, and they charged the lines. This was the labor of production: producing the power necessary to propel the instruments of capitalism. Indeed, the modern agricultural, industrial, commercial, and urban transformations were not just human enterprises. The history of capitalist accumulation is so much more than a history of humanity. Who built America, the textbook asks? Animals did”* (Hribal, 2003).

Already in previous economic systems, other-than-human animals had been used as currency, or as products, or as machines for production. What capitalism skilfully did was to take control of those ambiguous relationships in which the animal was, at the same time, a resource and a member of the human community. It dissociated those

'products' and 'machines' from the subject who they came from, from the *individual character of the 'operator's' experience*. In this way, not only the interests and the needs of the animals themselves were muted, but also the voices that were beginning to rise up to show solidarity with them and to demand an end to their slavery.

In the same way, this system achieved that the very concept of 'woman' be assimilated almost exclusively into the role given to her in the hetero-patriarchal home. According to Federici, capitalism has led women to believe that household chores and caring for children are 'an act of love', and it is still commonly accepted that only maternity, infinite patience and caring dedication make us 'real women'.

Control of the Body

Even so, to Silvia Federici the female body is not the only one in which capitalism intervenes, but the bodies of the proletariat in general are dominated through hunger, reproduction, the subordination of basic needs to work, etc. The case of the non-human animals is an absolute exponent of this domination, their bodies at the same time being a source of labour-power, machine production and products. In all these cases, the control of the reproductive capacities of individuals plays a fundamental role for the accumulation of wealth. **The sows, cows and sheep on the farms, female elephants and lionesses in the zoos and circuses, the orcas in the aquarium... usually resist reproducing. Their pregnancies are induced, their deliveries are scheduled, their daughters [sic] are stolen and killed by the same industry that steals life from them. It's them who decide how many bodies will be born and how they will optimize their productivity. Lives are created in order to be exploited and destroyed.** In a more veiled way, States legislate to punish a woman who does not want to collaborate in the reproduction of the workforce [*ed. – see for example the recent extension of prohibitions against abortion in Spain, Brazil, etc.*], and to have the last word about how, when and how much she should give birth: "*Capitalism has always needed to control the bodies of women because it's an exploitative system that privileges labour as the source of wealth accumulation[...] I imagine if women go on strike and don't produce children; capitalism comes to a halt*" (Federici, 2014).

Denial of reproduction, exercised both by humans and by individuals of other species, is without a doubt a powerful form of resistance, but it's not the only one. The animals have made changes in the history of labour by slowing or shutting down production, attacking their exploiters, fleeing and even forming maroon communities free in nature. The women accused and persecuted for witchcraft were not the only people who dared to challenge or question the power of the Church, the patriarchy and the economic system. If exploitation and rebellion exist beyond the classification of genus and species, so too can solidarity.

The search for the commons

Taking again the example of the witch hunts, the criminalisation and isolation of certain subjects means a breakdown in the community. The woman who wants to be something more than 'woman', who claims herself as a free individual, owner of her body and of her relationships, is presented as a monstrous lover of the devil, and enemy of humanity. She who wants to control her reproduction is shown as a devourer of children, who can make men impotent. **Ultimately,**

the woman is 'something else', different from other members of the social group. Midwives and healers, and the religions linked to respect for nature, are also stigmatised. Wildness and nature become something undesirable, and punishable. In the same way, non-human animals are punished and subdued until they are docile enough to be useful. These animals are also perceived as 'something else', however much they work and live with the group, and although there is no real taxonomic or logical difference between what it means to be 'human' and what it means to be 'animal'.

Thus, although capitalism in practice places workers, housewives and beasts of burden in the same position, only those who contribute with waged productive work are considered among them as members of the working class, and on the basis of this consideration build relationships of mutual support and solidarity. Both Hribal and Federici pursue with their research, more or less explicitly, a break with this limited view of the idea of class. Their proposals seek to broaden the concept of the commons, to put it into practice, and promote recognition among equals from below, by eliminating the barriers imposed from above to prevent that we find and help each other.

It's a newly-born idea, which has much to say and discuss, but at the same time it's one of the oldest ideas in the world: we are in this together, and together we'll get through this.

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