

Marxism, Gender and “the Transition”: A Comparative Review of Federici and Seccombe

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When socialist feminists discussed the potential and pitfalls of Marxism in the “domestic labor debate”¹, the specific relationship between patriarchy and capital emerged as a defining concern. The debate, however, was highly abstract and theoretical, and most of its historical concern revolved around the formation of the “family wage” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This discussion was certainly important, but it often arose from (and reinforced) a misleading conflation of industrialism and capitalism². Thus, while socialist feminists engaged with orthodox Marxism on a variety of terrains, they largely left to one side the question of capitalism’s *origins*. The two works reviewed here — Silvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch* and Wally Seccombe’s *A Millennium of Family Change* — are among the very few which strive to challenge and revise existing Marxist accounts of “the transition” by posing feminist questions and offering feminist insights. In pointing to such factors as the sexual division of labor, social reproduction, the control of women’s bodies and reproductive power, and the dynamic influence of family forms, Federici and Seccombe highlight processes which must occupy a prominent place in any materialist treatment. Ironically, however, both works are deeply flawed by their *retention* of problematic

¹ For useful overviews of the debate, see Leah Vosko, “The Past(s) (and Futures) of Feminist Political Economy in Canada: Reviving the Debate,” in Caroline Andrew, *et al.* (eds.), *Studies in Political Economy: Developments in Feminism* (Women’s Press: Toronto, 2003); and Sue Fergusson, “Building on the Strengths of the Socialist Feminist Tradition,” *New Politics*, No. 26 (Winter 1999).

² On this point, see Chris Middleton, “Women’s Labour and the Transition to Pre-Industrial Capitalism” in Lindsey Charles and Lorna Duffin (eds.), *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial England* (London: Croon Helm, 1985), p. 182.

assumptions from the more orthodox Marxist narratives. These assumptions prevent the authors from explaining the specific dynamics of capitalism as a social form, and therefore undermine their larger project of integrating sex/gender into the transition.

Of the two contributions, Federici's is the boldest but also the most problematic, so it is helpful to begin analysis with her *Caliban and the Witch* before turning to the refinements and nuances that Seccombe brings to bear. Federici explicitly situates her work within the theoretical heritage of the domestic labor debate, drawing on Dalla Costa and James' argument that the *exploitation* of women in the capitalist sexual division of labor and unpaid work plays a central function in the process of capitalist accumulation³. Federici agrees with the Marxist argument that primitive accumulation was a foundational process for the existence of capitalist society, but "departs" from Marx in two ways. First, whereas Marx of course placed primary focus upon the formation of a (male) waged proletariat and commodity production, Federici shifts the spotlight to women and their role in the production of labor-power itself. Three phenomena are regarded as especially decisive: 1) the development of a new sexual division of labor subjugating women's labor and reproductive functions; 2) the construction of a new patriarchal order based upon the exclusion of women from waged work; and 3) the "mechanization" of the female body into a machine for the production of new workers. In this reconstructed account of primitive accumulation, the witch hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries allegedly figure as importantly as colonization and the expropriation of the European peasantry⁴.

Second, Federici draws upon the world-systemic work of Maria Mies to suggest that, under capitalism, violence itself is a "productive force", making primitive accumulation a recurring and necessary aspect of capitalist development. Marx's suggestion that exploitation and disciplining of labor occurred "mostly through the workings of economic laws" was deeply mistaken, especially with reference to women⁵.

Caliban and the Witch praises on a number of levels. Most obvious is the sheer evocative power of its narrative — there can be little doubt that Federici possesses more than an academic

³ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), p. 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12-13, 16. See also Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (London: Zed Books, 1986), chapter 5.

interest in the histories of the oppressed, exploited, and marginalized. Her vivid and often terrifying depiction of “proletarian” women’s lives cannot but convince the reader that the disciplining and “mechanization” of the female body is a pertinent, but woefully uncharted, facet of early modern European history. Whether the number of victims claimed by the witch-trials runs into the hundreds of thousands or the millions, it is indeed striking that this holocaust has received such scant attention from historical materialists. Beyond the witch trials, subordination of women’s bodies, and repression of “deviant” sexuality, Federici highlights crucial aspects of the lives of male and female direct producers. Particularly crucial is the observation that, in the feudal village, “no social separation existed between the production of goods and the reproduction of the workforce; all work contributed to the family’s sustenance”⁶. Although somewhat misleading, this suggestion does speak to a dramatic difference between capitalist and pre-capitalist societies, with profound consequence for gender relations. Also commendable is Federici’s detailed account of the importance of the “commons” for direct producers, and women in particular. The fate of common land (and more broadly, of common *right*) must indeed be central to any account of the transition.

As impassioned, compelling, and expansive as Federici’s account is, we should not be blind to its severe deficiencies. While the number of specific errors and shortcomings is too large to be itemized here, they can be summarized with reference to a single theme: Federici’s temporally- and geographically-overextended notion of the transition. Betraying the influence of Marxian world systems theory⁷, Federici regards the transition as a centuries long process encompassing not only the entirety of Europe but the New World as well, and entailing not only enclosures, land privatization and the witch hunts, but also colonialism, the second serfdom, and slavery. In fact, Federici (echoing Pierre Dockes) suggests that slavery is “that form [of exploitation] toward which the master always strives”⁸. Despite Federici’s insistence that “one single [capitalist] logic” governed these processes, and without denying striking geographical parallels (e.g., witch hunts in

⁶ Federici, p. 25.

⁷ See *Ibid.*, p. 18, n. 1. Marxian world-systems theorists such as Immanuel Wallerstein, Samir Amin, and Andre Gunder Frank understood the emergence of capitalism as temporally and geographically extended process, predicated upon the metropolitan bourgeoisie’s exploitation of the “periphery” through mercantilism and colonialism. Various forms of coerced labor and generalized violence are thus given prominence as forms of “primitive accumulation” preceding industrialization and generalized “free” wage labor. For a further analysis of Marxian world systems theory and its influence on the work of Federici and other socialists feminists, see Gary Blank, “Gender, Production, and the ‘the Transition to Capitalism’: Assessing the Historical Basis for a Unitary Materialist Theory,” *New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry* 4:2 (2011): 6-28.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65. For Pierre Dockes’ analysis, see his *Medieval Slavery and Liberation* (York: Methuen, 1982).

both the Old and New Worlds), what actually stands out is the profoundly *distinct* nature of these forms of exploitation. Indeed, some of the richest and cogent passages of *Caliban* are those which offer a detailed explication of the modes of exploitation in the New World (*mita* work in Peru and Mexico, trading in French Canada, plantation slavery in the Caribbean) and the *differential* patterns of gender relations each entailed. There seems to be little linking these forms to specifically capitalist imperatives, aside from the broad suggestion that they all transitioned to capitalism in the end. The notion of “transition” here operates as convenient shorthand rather than a causal explanation of the process by which capitalism emerged from non-capitalism.

Federici’s failure to clearly explicate capitalism’s “laws of motion” is highly unfortunate, for in the end readers are not given any theoretical guidance for anchoring her rich description of gendered work and subordination to any rigorous theory of capitalism, aside from the suggestion that capital, capitalists, or the ruling class functionally required certain outcomes. Throughout *Caliban*, Federici erroneously conflates specifically English social processes (enclosures, proletarianization etc.) with those in continental Europe, calling into question every component of her reformulated notion of primitive accumulation. The witch hunts may have subordinated women’s reproductive knowledge and labor, the German guilds may have excluded women, and continental science may have legitimated the “mechanization” of women’s bodies—but how are we to understand their connection with capitalism? Federici fails to provide the answer. This does not mean that these phenomena have nothing to do with capitalism, or even if they do not, that they are somehow unimportant — only that if we are to fully comprehend their significance, we must surely require a more historically nuanced and geographically-specific account which clearly explicates the specificity of capitalism.

Wally Seccombe’s rather different account of the transition partially addresses these shortcomings. Rather than relying upon world systems theory, Seccombe draws on Marxists of a more historical bent, especially Perry Anderson. In fact, Anderson’s epic account of Western class society from antiquity to capitalism seems to provide the theoretical basis for Seccombe’s understanding of the production mode, which he then “expands” to include family forms (and therefore gender relations). This is a promising start. Anderson’s theorization of feudalism, in particular, is one of the most nuanced in the Marxist tradition, and makes some strides towards overcoming the misleading base/superstructure, economic/political distinction which has long

plagued historical materialism⁹. In this vein, Seccombe rightly notes that the economist error has stemmed not from an exaggeration of the weight of the socioeconomic dimension but instead from a false narrowing of its field, and a failure to conceptualize adequately the integration of the socioeconomic with politico-legal relations of the state and the cultural formation of groups and classes¹⁰.

An analytical expansion of the socioeconomic field enables the integration of that form of production characteristic of families, and of women's domestic labor in particular: the production of human labor power. Such recognition is important not only because it helps to address feminist concerns, but also because family forms have a discernible causal influence on the mode of production, shaping it and being shaped by it in turn. The social regulation of fertility, evidenced especially in particular marriage patterns, deserves a central place in historical materialist inquiry.

Seccombe's narrative is certainly more staid and less evocative than Federici's, but his theoretical rigor and attention to historical and geographical specificity ultimately renders a superior account. Like Federici, Seccombe considers the "early modern period" from the Black Death to approximately 1750 as "transitional"; however, his dedication to mode of production analysis allows for a much less functionalist account than that found in *Caliban*. Rather than linking all social struggles and phenomena during this period to the presumed imperatives of capital or a nascent capitalist class, Seccombe is at pains to distinguish between different forms of exploitative social relations, the dynamics underlying them, and the unique family forms they engendered. Whereas Federici labels any and all direct producers as "proletarian", Seccombe takes care to elaborate the differences between different forms of peasant servitude, semi-proletarian and cottager production, and "free" wage labor. According to Seccombe, broadly "feudal" (peasant-dominated) social relations persisted through the transition period, and must be distinguished from capitalist (proletarian-dominated) relations if family forms are to be adequately understood.

This leads to a number of insightful contrasts with Federici. Rather than positing the emergence of capitalism as being an unmitigated disaster for women, Seccombe prefers to chart

⁹ On Anderson's conception and some of its drawbacks, see George C. Comninel, "English Feudalism and the Origins of Capitalism," *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 27:4 (July 2000), p. 12-13; and Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Citizens to Lords: A Social History of Western Political Thought From Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (London: Verso, 2008), p. 166.

¹⁰ Wally Seccombe, "A Millennium of Family Change: Feudalism to Capitalism" in *Western Europe* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 10-11. See also Seccombe's "Marxism and Demography", *New Left Review*, No. 137 (January-February 1983), p. 28.

opportunities and restrictions across the women’s entire life cycle¹¹. While there may have been a certain unity of production and reproduction within peasant households, it should not be concluded that there was even a rough equality between men and women¹². Indeed, the imperatives of lordly surplus extraction and peasant subsistence required a legally and politically enshrined regulation of women’s reproductive function — women’s bodies were likely more “mechanized” in those conditions than under capitalism! It was in old age, in particular, that women’s status was most sharply debased by capital accumulation¹³. While placing less emphasis on the witch hunts, he also seems to offer a more compelling explanation for their occurrence, tracing them to the diminished population levels after the Black Death and *seigneurial* (not capitalist) concern for the maintenance of a tax- and rent-paying populace¹⁴.

Despite offering a more theoretically and historically compelling account of the transition, Seccombe does not avoid falling into difficulties which also afflicted Federici, albeit in a slightly different manner. In drawing upon such Marxist authors as Anderson, Rodney Hilton and E.A. Kosminsky, Seccombe too relies upon problematic assumptions regarding the dynamics and specificities of capitalism. While drawing sharper geographical/national distinctions than Federici, his analysis is explicitly a “regional” one, but in practice relies largely on English examples¹⁵. Seccombe does not regard this as problematic, suggesting that regional variation was largely a matter of “uneven and combined development”. The same process of capitalist development was experienced by both “vanguard” and “laggard” regions at different times and paces¹⁶. This process seems to be rooted in the orthodox Marxist notion of peasant differentiation/polarization. The assumption here is that capitalism emerged with the commutation of labor rents in Western Europe following the Black Death, when relative freedom from lordship enabled peasants to respond to market opportunities and stimuli by innovating, specializing, and accumulating, eventually

¹¹ Seccombe, *A Millennium*, p. 120.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 86-7.

¹³ See *Ibid.*, p. 244.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5-6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

engendering a polarization of the peasantry into rich yeoman farmers and landless laborers¹⁷. Thus, when suggesting that the Western European late/non-universal marriage pattern may be the “missing piece of the puzzle” in explaining the West’s unique rise to industrial capitalism, Secombe points to seven ways in which the pattern *facilitated* an already existing process of capital formation, efficiency gains, and productivity enhancements¹⁸.

Secombe may be quite correct to point to the significance of the late/non-universal marriage pattern. The problem is that his underlying assumption — that peasant differentiation played a causal role in the emergence of capitalism — is flawed. As “political Marxists” such as Ellen Wood and Robert Brenner have pointed out, the various Marxian theories of the transition, including those that both Federici and Secombe draw upon, assume what they have to explain: capitalist “laws of motion” themselves. What we need to reveal is the historical process which gave rise to distinctly capitalist imperatives. The exploitation of wage labor and market exchange existed for centuries and even millennia prior to the emergence of capitalism, but they did not yield the *requirement* to compete, profit maximize, and improve labor productivity. Capitalism emerged not simply from the quantitative extension of previously existing social relations, but from a qualitative transformation of “rules of reproduction”¹⁹.

Importantly, the “political Marxists” suggest that this rupture occurred specifically in early modern England, and was not matched by similar developments in continental Europe until the nineteenth century. All class societies prior to the emergence of capitalism were characterized by politically-mediated forms of surplus extraction—that is, there was no separation between the economic and the political, the “base” and the superstructure” because political powers were at the same time extractive powers (usually wielded over peasant producers)²⁰. In the aftermath of the Black Death, lordly relations of feudal exploitation were thrown into crisis by depopulation and peasant struggles. In Eastern Europe, feudal relations were re-established on a firmer basis, while

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 163-66. For a critique of this view, see Ellen Wood, *The Origins of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 37-44.

¹⁸ Secombe, *A Millennium*, p. 239-41.

¹⁹ On this, see Robert Brenner, “Property and Progress: Where Adam Smith Went Wrong” in Chris Wickham (ed.), *Marxist History-Writing for the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 49-111.

²⁰ For a more detailed explanation of the “political Marxist” understanding of capitalism and its implications for socialist feminism, see Blank, “Gender, Production, and the <<the Transition to Capitalism>>: Assessing the Historical Basis for a Unitary Materialist Theory.”

in France peasants claimed effective possession of the land from their lords even as state-directed taxation provided a new basis for political accumulation (i.e., the absolutist mode of exploitation). Only in England did capitalism emerge as an *unintended* consequence of class struggles, as lords lost their capacity for surplus extraction through coercive means and turned to “economic” (market-determined) rents. Contra Federici, it was the “economic” form of surplus extraction which was a unique and defining element of capitalism, without which its “laws of motion” cannot be understood.

To point to the political Marxist tradition is not to suggest that it somehow has all the answers; in fact, its body of analyses is often as deficient as previous Marxist frameworks in integrating gender and social reproduction. While “political Marxists” have placed central emphasis on what they term “rules of reproduction”, the agents of reproduction are usually assumed to be male, and family forms are under-explained and under-theorized²¹. The point is simply that “political Marxism” has (thus far) offered the most cogent account of capitalism’s origins because it, unlike other Marxist accounts, does not assume what needs to be explained. Attempts to integrate gender and families into a new account of the transition would be more successful if they proceed from this work, rather than the insufficient assumptions and concepts of previous Marxists work (world systems theory, Hilton, etc.). “Political Marxism”, in turn, could be reshaped for the better by integrating gender and family forms. There is already a strong affinity between Seccombe’s broad theoretical project and that of the Brenner *at al*. There is of course much greater distance with Federici, but no reason to think that her concerns cannot be addressed within a reworked “political Marxist” framework. In fact, the witch hunts might finally receive an adequate historical materialist treatment if their feudal and absolutist social context is recognized. After all, it was lawyers, judges, advocates, councils and other officials, as well as feudal landholders, who gained from the trials—not capitalists²².

²¹ One of the best “political Marxist” writers on these questions is Benno Teschke. But even his *The Myth of 1648* makes no reference to Wally Seccombe’s work, despite the fact that it covers essentially the same geographical expanse and historical period.

²² See Mies, p. 83-88. In fact, I find Mies’ account of the witch hunts to be far superior to Federici’s because she provides a relatively detailed explanation of who actually profited or otherwise benefited from the trials. Apart from occasional references to the work of Immanuel Wallerstein, there is little serious indication that *capital* was somehow involved.

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