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Hexing the Patriarchy: Witchcraft and Feminism as a Rebuttal to Capitalism

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“Hexing the Patriarchy”

“The feminist agenda is a socialist, antifamily political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians.” Pat Robertson, Christian Evangelist, seeking opposition for the Equal Rights Act in Iowa, used this message as a rallying cry (Associated Press, 1992). This claim, although at first glance quite humorous from an academic view, rather aptly encompasses the different tactics that have been used to oppress women, people of color, the queer community, and other minority populations across history. Accusations of witchcraft, a system of exploitation through capitalism, the demonization of the queer community, the degradation of a women’s right to choose—these have all been used in order to sustain the white, patriarchal, heterosexual control over most of the modern world. It is therefore our job to examine these systems of oppression—and how women and minority communities have created spaces of opposition. Witchcraft, specifically, has been used as both a label for women who do not fit society’s predetermined role and as a means of fighting this oppression. The following argument will outline the different forms of oppression that marginalized people have faced through the lens of capitalism, colonialism, and the patriarchy, while leading into a discussion of the ways in which women have combated these oppressive systems.

The Structure of Capitalism

In order to look at systems of oppression, the best place to begin this exploration is through the understanding of capitalism, its structure, and its roots. The development of capitalist structures lies in feudal society and its consequential spread through colonization of the ‘New World.’ Holly Lewis places the development of feudalism into capitalism into the perspective of people and their relationships with power in her book, “The Politics of Everybody.” She stresses that people are not simply thrown into capitalist social relations, but that they also “inhabit complex bodies that are collectively coded into different functions...that operate within the context of nation, culture, and class” (Lewis, 2016). People exist within capitalist systems and these systems also shape the relationships that individuals have with one another, whether that is worker to employer, student to teacher, parent to child, or gender to gender. The power dynamics that capitalism creates shapes as well the social dynamics of culture. The beginnings of capitalism originated from the European feudal system, wherein landless people, the proletariat, were forced to live with labor as their only commodity available to them. Under this system, workers were provided with food and housing in return for their labor, a system wherein workers knew exactly how much of their labor would be required for them to live. With the shift from the supply of living conditions to the granting of wages for labor, landowners were able to make large profits and a much larger surplus of goods than was previously possible. From these developments is where we can look at slavery in America after its colonization. People of lower classes had always been slaves, which made ample room for race-based slavery and dehumanization of Africans when they reached the question of how they would retain cheap and endless labor to farm their crops. In this way, capitalism crafts racism, “through capitalism’s need to devalue labor and leverage surplus populations” (Lewis, 2016). This makes the issue of minority suppression very explicable: ideas of colonization leads to attitudes of white

supremacy, and therefore the idea that capitalism is the more dominant system. This leads us to the question of how women and the queer community are equally impacted and degraded by this capitalist system.

A Note on Gendered Terms

To preface this section, I will be speaking about ‘men’ and ‘women’ in terms of the cisgender and binary stereotypes that have been pervasive for hundreds of years and do not allow for those who deviate from this binary. I do not attempt to exclude those whose identities lie outside of this binary, yet for academic purposes I will be using the terms women and men to describe individuals who identify accordingly with their defined gender at birth adjacent to their biology. Queer and nonbinary people are degraded to an even greater extent within this same system, yet we must first understand its origins to truly address these concerns. Intersectionality within conversations of oppression is required, and this will be addressed later in my argument.

“Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism”

The struggle between women and capitalism, begins with the commodification of sex and sexuality under an oppressive system. Kristen R. Ghodsee’s book, “Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism,” explores this linkage of sex and money through personal experience and lengthy evaluations of studies and theory. Within Ghodsee’s evaluation of the feminist explanation of the patriarchy, she asserts that feminists must strive to develop explanations for the patriarchy without legitimizing it, meaning that feminists cannot simply create excuses but must understand why male dominant philosophy has been tolerated for so long (Ghodsee, 2018). Throughout history, women have been excluded from the system of capitalism, exploited to a heavier degree, and not allowed to actively participate in their own financial situation. In order to remain independent, people must have the resources to make their own decisions (Ghodsee, 2018, 40). If one is dependent on another for resources, the option for choice disappears. She gives an overview of the theory of sexual economics, which explains that women have the commodity of sex, which, under heteronormative social viewpoints, they are able to either sell their sex, as a sex worker or ‘sugar baby’ or give it away as a wife, girlfriend, etc. Because women are forced to both care for and birth children, and due to longstanding inequalities, they are unable to make wages comparable to men, so therefore must rely on sex to secure their basic needs (Ghodsee, 2018, 101). Capitalism purposely places women into poverty to create a need for women to use sex to support their lives. This theory is obviously flawed, as it relies on the assumption that men’s sex drives are higher than women’s, an idea which has which has been consistently disproven. The reason for this assumption lies in the fact that men have never been reliant on their own sexuality as means for financial security—except in the cases of gay men, who are often reduced to the position of women within capitalist systems. Ghodsee also explains that within societies that maintain higher levels of gender equality, women do not need to hold their sex as a commodity and can be expressive of their sexuality in a similar fashion to the ways that men can (Ghodsee, 2018, 102).

However, Ghodsee cites an interaction with a friend of hers that exemplifies this theory and is one that most women can identify with as well. The friend in question was being denied access to her husband’s credit card, and when Ghodsee inquired about this imbalance of power, her friend explained that she and her husband had not been having sex enough, and when they started having regular sex again, she was given increased access to the family’s finances. None of her credit cards had her own name on them, and she was required to ask permission before spending (Ghodsee, 2018, 96-97). This situation feels old-fashioned, but it is the reality of many women throughout the world. Due to capitalism’s influence, the care of the house and children is

not viewed as equal in any case to the work that benefits employers and the system. At its core, capitalism shapes all human interactions as valuable as commodities, therefore reducing women's value as humans. It is because of these factors that Ghodsee asserts that "women have better sex under socialism," because when women are not reduced to their sexuality, they are freer to explore their sexuality and have experiences that are not shadowed with economic requirement and are therefore within a consensual power dynamic.

This system which commodifies women's sexuality also causes the patriarchal nature of capitalist society to be even more influential. As I mentioned previously, bisexual and gay men are often held to the same standard as women due to their sexual experiences with men, and bisexual and lesbian women are devalued due to the absence of men in sexual experiences. Therefore, the devaluing of queer people is largely due to the absence of those in power: cisgender and heterosexual men. In Maggie Rosen's feminist perspective on witchcraft, she states that predetermined sex roles date back to the biblical tale of Adam and Eve, in which woman was made for man (Rosen, 2017, 11). This example of Christian influence is a large reason for the discrimination of both women and queer people, an influence which spread around the world due to the supposed idea of 'manifest destiny' of European colonizers.

Homophobic Africa?

With this background of capitalism and its pervasive nature, we can then look to the labelling of women and queer people as witches. As Rosen states, "Witch-hunting was a method to condemn Puritan women who did not perform femininity the way they were expected," which then led to witch hunts to rid society of these rebellious individuals (Rosen, 2017, 11). Although the most common citation of this happening in early Puritan America, it causes greater harm within African countries that were colonized by Europeans through both exploitation and ideas.

In order to explore the ways that colonialism has labelled women and the queer community as witches, one can look to an evaluation of witchcraft and power by Isak Niehaus. As an anthropologist who used fieldwork on cases of homosexuality in Impalahoek, South Africa, Niehaus was able to gather firsthand knowledge on the perceptions of homosexuality through gossip as a source of social information. He recounted rumors of witches in South Africa having sex with animals and nonhuman familiars and engaging in acts of homosexuality (Niehaus, 2002, 272). In the early 1900s, residents of Impalahoek attributed various misfortunes to witches and were fearful of a secret witch trade, causing them to banish suspected witches from their villages. Niehaus believes that the main cause for this fear was due to the supposed sexual practices of witches. As we saw in Ghodsee's explanation for the exploitation of women's sexuality, we see similar values within this South African community. Based on a survey of 100 families, around 88% of husbands were employed, while only 17% of wives also held employment (Niehaus, 2002, 276). This creates an unequal dynamic wherein wives are reliant on their sexuality for survival. Aware of this imbalance, men become fearful of their wives using witchcraft as means of combatting this oppression. In this community men often had multiple wives, or girlfriends, who would be even more likely to be accused by "chief wives," of witchcraft (Niehaus, 2002, 277). Witchcraft in this society seems to mainly focus on ideas of sexual revenge and control, which both blames women for their reliance on sex and requires it. Practitioners of witchcraft were believed to induce abortions and engage in lesbian sexual encounters, which disregard cultural norms and attempt to subvert power. There are many instances of female healers using practices commonly associated with witchcraft, however, it is assumed that, "what men constructed as witchcraft, women saw as a desperate last resort to heal disharmonious social relationships," meaning that the women themselves saw these practices as

attempts to keep their husbands faithful (Niehaus, 2002, 281). Another aspect of culture that perpetuates these power dynamics within Impalahoak is the acceptance of male homosexuality in everyday life. Although it is illegal, it often goes undiscussed, while female homosexuality is almost always associated with witchcraft. This feature of culture is understandable in context, as, “sexually assertive women denaturalized male domination,” deeming female homosexuality unnatural and therefore associated with witchcraft (Niehaus, 2002, 289).

Across Africa it is apparent that witchcraft and homosexuality have been around for far longer than European colonization, however, the reasons for more recent outcry are outlined in Awondo, Geschiere and Reid’s *Homophobic Africa? Toward A More Nuanced View*. Within their account, they assert that, “same-sex practices and identities have a long history in Africa and even more important, that homophobia, rather than homosexuality, is a Western import” (Awondo, 2012, 5). This ‘importation’ of homophobia is due largely in part to Christian influences, which cite the unnatural quality of homosexuality. Looking to events in Cameroon specifically, we see gay men being accused of practicing witchcraft. The linking of male homosexuality and witchcraft lies in anal penetration rituals that gay men partake in, which is seen to be a form of male domination and therefore unacceptable (Awondo, 2012, 9). In 2006, widespread hatred of queer people spiked due to multiple published articles including lists of fifty or more names of those suspected to engage in same-sex activity, most of them men. The affective nature of these lists lead people to become excited, and fear was spread through the different accounts of homosexual activity. Homosexuality has been a crime under Cameroon law since the 1970s; during this time of widespread panic, many people opposed civil rights and nondiscrimination laws for queer people (Awondo, 2012, 9-10). The poisonous nature of the spread of Christianity through colonization is apparent in modern society: opposition came directly from Catholic officials, including the president of Cameroon, a practicing Catholic.

Silvia Federici, in her paper titled, “Witch-Hunting, Globalization, and Feminist Solidarity in Africa Today”, questions if it is even applicable to use the word ‘witchcraft’ to refer to pre-colonial times, as the term originated from European influence (Federici, 2008, 4). The use of the label of witchcraft throughout Africa, which was only used during the 1900s and on, erupted primarily as a justification for the removal of independent women from society, such as widows who still held property, or as a general scapegoat for economic disparity in certain areas. ‘Witch’ has been used to degrade women throughout history, an idea which only recently spread to African countries due to global and European influence.

Witchcraft and Feminism as a Rebuttal

Now that we have explored the ways that women and queer people have been exploited and degraded by the labelling of ‘witch,’ it is necessary to also examine the ways that these groups have used witchcraft as means to fight oppressive states. In researching these methods, I discovered Wendy Griffin’s article on feminist witchcraft, female divinity, and the Goddess movement. She begins with a discussion of goddess imagery in witchcraft and the worshipping of the feminine that is prevalent in feminist interpretations of witchcraft. Griffin also used firsthand experiences from covens of witches whom she observed. Although much of feminist witchcraft is regarded as overwhelmingly white, which is recognized in Griffin’s discussion, the ideas that are present in the ideology are largely based around combatting oppression from patriarchal systems. Griffin also acknowledges that many of the women within these covens were either lesbian or bisexual, as it is often queer and marginalized people who find solace within witchcraft circles (Griffin, 1995, 4). In opposition to their view of patriarchal religions, witchcraft often aims at “[legitimizing] female power and authority,” or in terms of non-female

identifying queer people, adopting feminine power and authority as an antithesis to patriarchal power (Griffin, 1995, 13). This idea of using witchcraft as power, plays into the fears previously discussed, when women who are independent or stray from preconceived cultural roles are labelled as witches. In this way, we can see how women have in fact reclaimed this term that was once used against them in order to subvert the very people who have labelled them as such. Feminist witchcraft also aims at freeing the idea of sexuality as a sin, as is heavily stressed in Christianity, but instead to “celebrate the erotic” (Griffin, 1995, 13). We can again see connections here with Ghodsee’s claims of women “having better sex under socialism”; when women are freed from the pervasive nature of heterosexual male sexuality, they arrive in a place where their sexuality can be celebrated and explored.

A Departure From Tradition

It is here where we can find the goal of this paper’s exploration, which was to discover the reasons for and ways that women and marginalized groups have used witchcraft as means to combat oppression. As we explored the roots of capitalism and colonialist ideas of manifest destiny that spread throughout the world, it began to be apparent the ways that a heterosexual male perspective perverts our very culture. Next, in examining different ways that women and queer people have been oppressed and marginalized through this system, we finally arrived at the ways that these groups have reclaimed witchcraft as a weapon of power and authority. These movements continue to grow in modern times, with a recent surge in young and queer people into witchcraft as a departure from Christianity and tradition. The ways that the youth and oppressed groups have found solace within this community is both inspiring and creates hope in perhaps one day arriving at a culture that ceases to use power and the patriarchy to oppress and silence human beings.

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