Witch Hunts Through the Lens of Hysteria: A Psychosocial Perspective

An important recent Brazilian psychoanalytic study on the history of hysteria and its contemporary manifestations posits the witch hunts of the 16th century as primarily driven by hysteria epidemic and the repressive responses it caused (Jorge & Travassos, 2021). This perspective positions the witch hunts as a repression of the unknown in psyche, within a feminine manifestation, and is an exceptional work about how subject's psychic (and the unconscious) dimensions participate to big social events and continuing presents itself as a fundamental piece of the social web.

The authors demonstrate how, within Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Möbius band represents the subject as indissociable from the world, in which there is no such thing as an inner and outside world (p. 34). The study is filled with excerpts that underscore the significance of hysteria throughout human history. It aims to demonstrate how a historical analysis of hysteria, particularly in its collective manifestations (referred to by the author as hysteria epidemics), is crucial for understanding both hysteria as the most fundamental subject structure and the evolution of knowledge. This involves revisiting Lacan's use of the words hysteria and history, which contributes to shaping the term history.

> Lacan showed that the constitution of each subject occurs from the incidence of the discourse of the Other - alterity that includes parents, family, place in offspring, social class, language, nation, epoch, etc. (...) Therefore, hysteria and history emerge hand in hand already at the beginning of Lacan's teaching. (Jorge & Travassos, 2021, p. 90, free translation)

Although the work succeeds in arguing for the idea of the subject as a Moebius strip and hysteria as a psychic-social phenomenon, it does not delve so profoundly into the relation between the most iconic collective manifestations of hysteria (such as the witches and their persecution). It still seems to neglect the strong social dimension of the economic shift that was happening at the time, as Silvia Federici (2004) shows us. Her

work, one of the most famous and important recent works on the theme, is not quoted or even mentioned. How did hysteria help shape the end of feudalism and/or manifest resistance to this change? And conversely, how did the social changes at that time shape the way women experienced the world?

From a feminist Marxist perspective, Federici does impressive work exploring the nuances of the economic and social conditions that constructed the persecution of women in the 16th century. She argues that the money-based economy and the struggles (and failings) of working classes, coupled with the participation of the Church, led to the patriarchal structure that commodified women's bodies in capitalism, and subsequently, led to them being persecuted bodies.

Federici (2004) contends that the persecution of witches was not merely a pre-capitalist relic but also a pivotal moment in establishing capitalist social relations, particularly in the context of land privatization and the control of women's bodies. According to her, the decline of feudalism set the stage for a new form of material reproduction, marked by changes in production, trade, and social organization.

According to Federici, women in feudal society occupied a submissive position relative to men, a structure upheld by the power dynamics controlled by feudal lords who owned the land where women lived and worked alongside their husbands and families. During that period, women's submission to men regarding access to common goods and property was evident, but their bodies, work, and reproductive capacity were not explored differently in relation to working-class men. Despite the established division of labor during this period, there was no inherent devaluation of women's work; rather, all contributions, regardless of gender, were essential for family sustenance. Moreover, this division of labor served as a source of power and protection for women.

However, with the advent of the money-based economy, a significant shift occurred. As the author notes "*every woman (other than those privatized by burgeois men) became a communal good"* (p. 109, author's highlights). This transition marked the establishment of a patriarchal social organization, wherein women themselves were commodified, their labor (and their reproductive labor) deemed a natural resource outside traditional market relations.

The author does not delve into psychoanalytical interpretations of the phenomenon; in fact, she only references psychoanalysis and Lacan once, in a footnote, in relation to Braidotti's work (p. 264). Terms like "hysteria" and "Freud" are notably absent from her discussion. Her work almost suggests that women as subjects had not changed within this social shift, resisting only in rational and conscious ways. The madness and the unusual manifestations that are extensively described in the literature stay largely overlooked in the development of her work. This approach, similarly, implies that the church and men began persecuting those women merely because some of them spoke more or louder, as if it were a strategic and conscious attempt to control social disruptions. Yet, many works demonstrate that there were indeed manifestations, often in women, that seemed unusual compared to their typical behavior. Not only psychoanalysis notices this, but historians do as well. Thus, while it is possible to acknowledge the feminist movement that Federici extensively focuses on in the economic-organizational dimension of the phenomenon, excluding the psychic dimension of what was happening with women in that period seems neither fair nor productive.

The author underscores that during that period, knowledge forms capable of instigating consciously and rationally calculated life changes gained value, thus leading to the persistence of rationality in driving practical knowledge today. This cartesian-rational triumph facilitated the emergence of a new form of material reproduction, marked

by shifts in production, trade, and social organization. Furthermore, she highlights the role of scientific and technological advancement in shaping social life and dictating possibilities for individuals. Therefore, would not worth incorporating this psychic, unconscious dimension of the phenomenon, that could offer us a more profound understanding of how women historically responded to social changes, often through non-rational means? This would not only demonstrate resistance to the prevailing social organization but also to the emerging worldview and understanding of the human that was gaining prominence at the time.

To respond this question, a Psychosocial framework seems fundamental. Psychoanalysis, traditionally situated within the realm of the individual's mental landscape, finds a compelling extension into the psychosocial sphere within the connection to history and sociology. Moreover, the psychosocial lens facilitates an examination of the broader societal implications of psychoanalytic insights, transcending the confines of the individual to illuminate collective experiences and traumas. Psychosocial theory enables scholars to explore how the cartesian separations were developed in the history of knowledge and to critically address the effects of the capitalism, for example, on subjects. However, as Frosh and Baraister (2008) alert:

> cherished psychoanalytic ideas have to be rethought for the different context of investigation and expression: transference and countertransference, for example, are simply not the same in and out of the consulting room. But it also holds onto an important psychoanalytic insight that helps significantly with the task of thinking ‘‘psychosocially’’. This is the claim that psychological and social, inner and outer, are only artificially separated, and are constituted by something else that runs through them, sometimes emerging in surprising ways that psychoanalysts code as the ‘‘unconscious’’ in its signifying, ‘‘non-sensical’’ materialization (p. 363)

Baraister (2015) develops an interesting way of thinking about the Psychosocial Studies realm through a transdisciplinary approach, considering not only the differences and the approximations of the disciplines from a spatial perspective but also from a

temporal one. She develops an argument about how concepts are capable of moving from one field to another and which concepts, despite their development and even their anachronism, can be revived in order to renew critical thought. Then,

> Rather than viewing psychosocial studies as interdisciplinary in the sense of creating a new dialogue, say, between queer studies and affect studies (i.e. transdisciplinary in the sense of the production of categories that move across both disciplines and yet remain distinct from them), I want to argue for psychosocial studies as an opportunity for anachronistic concepts (ones that have come to be sensed as 'embarrassments' in contemporary theory) to be reanimated, and where 'old' and 'new' ideas speak to one another contemporaneously in generative ways. (Baraister, 2015, p. 210)

Thus, she positions the field of Psychosocial Studies as a transdisciplinary domain that challenges the entrenched notions of the individual and the collective, the psychological and the social, the subject and the culture (Baraitser, 2015). In that vein, the field critically examines the historical divisions that have emerged in knowledge and endeavors to transcend them. By incorporating perspectives from psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and numerous other disciplines, Psychosocial Studies aims to achieve a deep comprehension of the complex interactions among the so-called "mind," "body," and "social environment," while also reviving lost concepts to challenge these distinctions. She exemplifies this approach by citing Butler's work (1997), which revisits the concept of psychic reality through a dual examination of it within the frameworks of Freud and Foucault:

> I want to suggest, with Michel Serres, that this idea, which was 'of its time', and is now 'out of its time', and thereby 'wrong' in that double sense that the contemporary suggests, resurfaces in the work of Judith Butler through a particular contiguity, or 'folding' that she performs between the work of Freud and Foucault, which allows the former gains of the concept of psychic reality to become active again. (Baraister, 2015, p. 210)

In the realm of burgeoning Psychosocial Studies, which is deeply committed to exploring the inseparable nexus between psychic and social dimensions, Lacanian psychoanalysis, both in theory and practice, holds the potential to disrupt conventional

notions regarding self-knowledge, the 'inner world,' and the delineation between internal and external realms.

Additionally, it involves comprehending the emergence of the subject within an already established linguistic and symbolic world. The exploration of psychic processes intertwined with social structures allows for a nuanced understanding of how social and historical phenomena – such as the rise of capitalism – persist in shaping contemporary lives. It also enables us to understand how contemporary subjects sustain economic structures such as capitalism, elevating its status by adding a neoliberal dimension to it in the postmodern era.

Hysteria might be seen as an outdated concept that, with the progress of psychiatry, regressed into a stigmatizing and misogynistic category of disorder. Consequently, it strayed from its modern psychoanalytical conceptualization (since Lacan, moving from a disorder to a fundamental aspect of the divided subject) and encountered essential and necessary renewed criticism from feminist perspectives. As a result, it fell out of favor beyond psychiatric and Lacanian psychoanalysis circles, remaining confined to clinical and predominantly pathological contexts, thereby diminishing its capacity to ignite social discussions similar to those advocated by Federici.

Jorge and Travassos (2021), who are part of this Lacanian circle that still insists in the possibility of working the hysteria as a clinical structure in a non-pathologizing and non-stigmatizing way, point out that precisely this transition in conceptualization (always incomplete) of hysteria has its historical value insofar as its variations over time indicate the index of a culture (p. 34). Thus, "considered a witch and heretic by the Catholic Church, the hysteric was burned alive at the stakes of the Inquisition, only to later be found as a mental patient in psychiatry compendiums" (p. 34, free translation), indicating

how its dual inscription over time perfectly illustrates the transition from the age of shadows to the era of science, or, in other words, the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the main focus of Federici's work.

In this sense, revisiting the period of the witch hunts through the lens of hysteria not only should not be dismissed, even though feminist criticisms of its stigmatizing use are valid, but it can, in a psychosocial approach to the issue, provide us with an even deeper understanding of the rise of capitalism, patriarchal society, and the role of rationalism in sustaining these structures.

Similar to Butler's approach, which preserves a notion of psyche in light of Foucault's insights and employs a temporal folding, enabling Freud's concepts to resonate in a modern context (Baraister, 2015), a Lacanian interpretation of hysteria as a discourse that both denounces and evokes the dominant knowledge of each era could complement, rather than contradict, Federici's work.

Thus, if the “most important historical question addressed by the book is how to account for the execution of hundreds of thousands of “witches” at the beginning of the modern era, and how to explain why the rise of capitalism was coeval with a war against women.” (Federici, p. 5), a Psychosocial approach could rise other related questions that also helps in a approximation to the main problem Federici tries to navigate. If during the rise of capitalism (and Cartesian rational thought, as Federici points out) a series of bodily and supernatural manifestations emerge in predominantly female bodies, what kind of knowledge would hysteria be evoking at that moment? Why the hysteria manifestations represented a threat to the new social structure to the point of being massively and violently repressed? Why this kind of being in the world was intolerable? What was it reporting or challenging?

By asking this questions within a psychosocial framework, we could open a path to witness how the psyche can exert influence over socially constructed norms, regulatory practices of governance, and the impacts of capitalism on contemporary subjects. Furthermore, apart from the psychoanalytical reading of the subject structure to contribute to the sociological understanding of the rise of capitalism and its gender effects, this more politically oriented interpretation of hysteria can be reintroduced to the clinical realm. This allows the violence of social norms and their mutability to be integrated into our comprehension of the subject's emergence in clinical contexts.

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Mark: 76

This is a really great essay. You give an excellent account of psychosocial studies and your discussion of what it might contribute to our understanding of the witch hunts and the rise of capitalism is original and engaging. You do a nice job of taking Federici's arguments seriously while also suggesting what she might be overlooking.

You can work on how you engage with other texts. There are places here where some references would really strengthen your points. On the other hand you draw too heavily on Baraitser in the middle of the essay. There is too much direct quotation for a relatively short essay. You also seem to take a few passages verbatim from a previous essay, which you should not do in academic assessments.

Overall though, fantastic work.