

Black death and the witch hunts



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The Black Death which was caused by the great famine that hit Europe was the cause of the rapid change in the demography of the continent, “ A turning point in the course of the medieval struggles was the Black Death, which killed on an average, between 30 and 40, of the European population (Federici, 2004).” The death toll was further accelerated by the fact that the malnutrition caused by the famine compromised the resistance of the people against diseases (Federici, 2004). As the death mainly affected the peasants who provided labor in the lands of the nobility, their competence in work reduced due to the eventual possibility of facing death. The scarcity of labor that followed the Black Death consequently raised the wages of the peasants and gradually the living conditions (Federici, 2004). With the improved conditions for the peasants, they revolted against the rule of the nobility which was successful in most of the countries. The political class turned the peasants against themselves as a counter-revolution method by allowing the men to degrade the peasant women, a condition that set grounds for witch hunts. 0

Before the Black Death, the role of women in the society was mainly doing reproductive work. The society was organized in a patriarchal manner, and most of the productive work was done by the males in the society (Federici, 2004). The work that was left for the women was mainly doing housework in their master’s house and others duties such as spinning wool (Federici, 2004). The work done by the women was wage less and was viewed as a social service to the society. However, their most important role in the society was giving birth. By their virtual act of giving birth, they provided

children who would ensure the continuity of the society. The process of giving birth was also seen as the process by which labor was produced by giving rise to individuals who would work in the lands of the nobility and as soldiers in the army.

After the Black Death, the role of women in the society changed and completely took a new turn. With the people increasingly moving to the city, some of the women were left as single mothers to fend for their families (Federici, 2004). The fact that the single women with families needed to provide for their families coupled with the scarcity of labor at present, allowed the women to access paying jobs due to the reduction of the gender division. The women were, therefore, able to accumulate wealth in contrast to the previous situation before the Black Death (Federici, 2004). The avenues through which women acquired wealth were further broadened by the legalization of prostitution in the European countries as a measure to combat acts of homosexuality that proved to be a threat to the procreation process (Federici, 2004). For the women, the acquired status was good and even worth defending.

The witch hunts were beginning by the political classes that ruled Europe after the aftermath of the Black Death (Federici, 2004). The devastating effects that the epidemic had caused to the economy of the continent necessitated the political classes to take matters that dealt with population growth and reproduction into their hands. The reason for the control of the reproduction process was an as a result of the labor crisis that ensued with the event of the Black Death (Federici, 2004). Therefore, the reproductive crimes that came in the way of population growth were heavily punished.

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Witches were, therefore, punished as they were thought to prevent to population growth by sacrificing children to the devil, a belief that spearheaded the witch hunts. Furthermore, witches were seen to have the ability to cause harm to individuals, and the hunts were also a protective mechanism.

References

Federici, S. (2004). *Caliban and the Witch*. New York, NY: Autonomedia.