

The Great Hunt: Return of the Burning Times

By Mary Beaudoin

The Great Hunt of today takes various forms with the whole world as hunting grounds: there are fishing expeditions to identify domestic enemies, hunts to apprehend undocumented people and suspected terrorists, and hunts for declared enemies in other countries.



“Cat’s Cradle” by artist/ photographer Janieta Eyre. From a series called “Incarnations,” in which she explored her doppelgänger through photographic doubles of herself.

Today we consider it ridiculous that people once believed human beings possessed supernatural powers and should therefore be burned alive, hung, or broken on a wheel to destroy the devil within. But, demonic possession was once a deeply held belief that spread throughout Europe from Italy to Scandinavia. During what is referred to as the Early Modern Period, scholars now estimate that 40,000 to 60,000 people were put to death for witchcraft—most of them between 1550-1650. Historians call this the time of the Great Hunt, or the Burning Times.

In that era, fantastic ideas were put forth to justify belief in the irrational. When the suspected witches of old had airtight alibis, ways were invented to get around them. An accused witch’s spouse might testify that she had been sleeping soundly beside him all night in bed, but she could still be found guilty of going abroad in the dark to perform diabolic deeds. This was explained by the idea that a person’s spirit could leave her body and take the form of an animal, or a doppelgänger (her double or evil twin) and thus she could be in two places at once. The image of witches on

broomsticks traversing the night sky was borne of the idea that spirits were leaving their bodies and going off to participate in devil worship, or black sabbaths.

This horrific period of time gave us the “witch hunt” as a metaphor to describe a frenzied search for perceived enemies, with little regard for their actual guilt or innocence. However, today’s politically motivated hunts are no longer predicated on the fear that people actually possess supernatural powers—or are they? The modern mentality no longer holds such irrational beliefs as demonic possession—or does it? It might be worth comparing some of the characteristics of that era when we think about what’s happening today—characteristics such as:



“The sleep of reason brings forth monsters.” (“El sueño de la razón produce monstruos.”) by Francisco Goya, 1799. From the series Los Caprichios.

Grand scale of the hunt: The Great Hunt of contemporary times like that of the earlier period is conducted on a grand scale. It was initiated by U.S. authority and is accompanied by the rising power of NATO. It takes on various forms with the whole world as hunting grounds: there are fishing expeditions to identify foreign and domestic enemies, hunts to apprehend undocumented people and alleged terrorists, and hunts for declared enemies in other countries.

Belief in evil powers: A declared enemy in another country often takes the form of an “evil dictator,” characterized by possessing such enormous capacity for evil that his power and reach are far beyond that of mortal men. Even though his country

doesn't possess the capability to challenge the best equipped military in the world, and his most advanced weapons systems can not reach the U.S. (or don't exist—i.e., Iraq and Iran's WMD), he is attributed with the ability and determination to be an imminent threat—something so irrational that it necessitates a belief in non-existent objects being able to fly through the air, undetected, in a supernatural way. We are suppose to think that anything is possible because he is a madman with erratic behavior, which includes suicidal tendencies. At the same time that he is threatening the U.S. and/or NATO allies, he is said to be “killing his own people”—who need to be rescued from him. While it's only realistic to acknowledge that some heads of nations do deal harshly with domestic enemies, including killing their own people, this is reminiscent of the cannibalism that accused witches were said to practice at their sabbaths and is used as a rationale for outside military intervention which kills his people in far greater numbers.

Reports can also be embellished to create to a demonic image. Some foreign leaders have even been alleged to perform actions akin to the rituals said to have been observed at witch's sabbaths—killing babies and conducting sexual orgies. In 1991, when Saddam Hussein invaded neighboring Kuwait, the 15-year old daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the U.S. testified that Saddam Hussein's soldiers were dumping babies out of incubators, something that was later proved to be blatantly false. In 2011, Muammar Gaddafi was reported to have ordered Viagra for his soldiers so that they could supposedly rape the women of Libya, while simultaneously defending their country and themselves against 20,000 NATO sorties.

We are told that the only way to stop these “evil doers” is by “hunting them down” and murdering them in cold blood as was done to “witches” of old, destroying their tremendous power. Among those leaders described as diabolic are the late Sadaam Hussein, the late Osama bin Laden, Kim Jong-il, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Muammar Gaddafi, and to a less extent Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro, who have both escaped multiple assassination attempts. Groups are also described as possessing super-human evil traits: Hamas, Hezbollah, the FARC, the Taliban, Al Qaeda, the Republican Guard of Iran, Al-Shabaab in Somalia. Evil seems to dwell especially in geographic regions where the U.S. and NATO have “interests.” (Ironically, some of these leaders or groups were originally given or sold weapons and empowered by the U.S. In some cases, the U.S. policy of military aggression has been creating more real enemies with potential for blowback, though not on the scale of U.S. military.)

Entire countries are demonized. Afghanistan was demonized for supposedly providing a haven for Al Qaeda. Two of George Bush's three “access of evil” countries continue to be vilified by the U.S. under Obama—North Korea and Iran. Countries and groups can be put on a terrorist list at any time at the sole discretion of the State Department.

Those who try to defend a geographic area, its people and resources are considered evil and enemies. Those in sympathy with the defenders, or even critical of U.S. foreign policy, may also be considered suspect and are sometimes persecuted.

While controlling financial entities plunge today's capitalist world into global crisis, the fear of some economic systems is so great that such systems, are unequivocally demonized—communism with its shared resources, socialism with its public ownership, and Islam, which is both a religious and economic system, with laws that include the forgiveness of debt and prohibition of usury (a great inconvenience for the World Bank and the IMF).



Recent scholarship, based on actual court records, estimates that 40,000 to 60,000 people were executed as witches in the Burning Times when the Great European Witch Hunt was on.

Fear mongering: In the Burning Times common people supported and often initiated the persecution of alleged witches. The Great Hunt today is dependent on inculcating the U.S. populace with a belief that we must live in constant fear that evil forces are out to destroy us. Recently, it was reported in the mainstream media that we should be concerned that our neighbor on the block could actually be a “lone wolf terrorist,” an image evocative of a werewolf. After 9/11, Islamophobia became rampant. Propaganda is spread about Islam as a destructive force determined to take over the Christianity in the western world. It's the business of Fox News and Clear Channel Radio to generate fears like this.

Shapeshifting and Anthropomorphism: The women and men accused of witchcraft in earlier centuries were said to sometimes take the form of animals. Today people don't literally believe in shapeshifting, but metaphorical comparisons come close as the “evil ones,” aside from the lone wolf, are compared to reptiles, rodents and

insects. Killing an Al Qaeda leader is called “cutting off the head of the snake.” An unnamed U.S. official, speaking about the constant flow of young fighters from Pakistan into Afghanistan, was reported by the Washington Post on October 7, 2011, to have said: “They are like bees. How many do you have to kill to get them all?” A Reuters headline on October 21, announced that Gaddafi, in an attempt to evade capture was “caught like a rat in a sewer”—a description similar to Saddam Hussein being “found in his spider hole.”

Kill them all: Today, those identified as enemies are hunted with bullets, aerial bombings and unmanned drones. Hundreds, thousands, even more than a million people have been killed in foreign countries—many burned alive by bombs supposedly to stop evil dictators and groups. Drone operators in the U.S. refer to targets they site on their scopes, from thousands of miles away, as “scorchers” when they are instantly incinerated by Hellfire missiles. The wicked ones are to be stopped by any means necessary, even if that entails killing innocent people in the process, a rationale reminiscent of the belief that it was better to kill many innocent people than let one witch escape—“Kill them all and let God sort them out.”

Entrapment, unfair trials, military tribunals, torture, and imprisonment of political enemies are other contemporary practices for dealing with “evil.”

Institutionalized accusations: In the Burning Times, allegations of witchcraft were supported by the elite in secular society and institutionalized in secular courts, conveniently serving as a means to control the population. Anyone stepping out of line could be under suspicion. But people didn’t even need to step out of line to be accused. Someone might wish them out of the way for some reason. They could also be scapegoated or accused at random, creating a generalized fear of authority throughout the land. Today’s hunts originate in the U.S. with the Executive branch and its Department of Justice or Pentagon, or the CIA, and are prosecuted in federal courts, military tribunals, and grand juries, or conducted extra-judicially by authority.

The targets--women, others: Vulnerability increased the possibility of being targeted in the Burning Times. Many of the accused were elderly, poor and vulnerable but during witch panics anyone could be considered a witch. Today, people from the Middle East and Somalia, people of color, dissidents, antiwar and union organizers, peace activists, international solidarity activists, those who object to U.S. foreign policy are targets.

During the Burning Times, men were accused of witchcraft, but 75-80% of the people accused were women. Today most of those recently subpoenaed to appear at a federal grand jury investigation of “material support for terrorism” are women antiwar activists in the Midwest. In a separate case, two Somali women, naturalized American citizens from Rochester, Minnesota, were put on trial in a U.S. district federal court and found guilty, by an all white jury, of “material support for

terrorism.” The accused have been attributed with having powers of influence, finance and access far beyond what is realistic for their modest means.

Teachers and nurses and their unions, welfare recipients, Social Security and Medicare recipients aren't blamed for crop failure or cows dying, but they were used as scapegoats for the country's economic woes today. Although there are certainly men in all of these categories, the majority are women.

Border regions: Although witch hunting occurred in many places, historians have found some patterns of hunting in the border regions between nation states where there was less centralized control. Today, the southwest border of the United States, asserting powers of state and region as opposed to federal government, is a main focus for hunting undocumented Latinos. In Maricopa County, Arizona, a notorious sheriff even boasts of a partnership with local citizens to hunt down the undocumented.

Kill lists: In the twenty-first century, the executive branch has expanded the hunt to include killing unarmed people without trial. Supposedly, Navy Seals killed Osama bin Laden in a house in Pakistan. And now even American citizens living abroad can be killed without a trial. Most recently the cleric Anwar al-Awlaki was hunted and killed in Yemen, not for actual acts but for “inspiring acts.” Also, killed was his sixteen year old son. The sons of Gadaffi and Saddam Hussein were hunted and killed, as well, presumably because they were likely to possess powers belonging to their father. Even Gadaffi's very young grandchildren were killed in an effort to destroy a family residence. During the Great European Witch Hunt, families were sometimes accused of demonic possession. Although witches in past centuries were also killed extra-judicially, many of those accused of witchery were at least given trials.



Burning times, burning eyes. This woman was pepper sprayed at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. during a protest against drones, Oct. 8., part of the Occupy D.C. movement at Freedom Plaza.

Photo: AP/ Jose Luis Magana.

Forcing admission of guilt through torture: In the Burning Times, suspected witches were often tortured in attempts to extract confessions. In the contemporary world, torture has been used for the same purpose. But, it is just as irrational to expect a confession of guilt because it is well known that people will confess to anything when tortured. Torture is used to create evidence that isn't there.

Hunters with economic and career motives: Witch hunting was an occupation with a monetary reward during the Great Hunt. In July of 2010 in an investigative series for the Washington Post, Dana Priest and William Arkin reported that, after 9/11 "some 1,271 government organizations and 1,931 private companies work on programs related to counterterrorism, homeland security and intelligence in about 10,000 locations across the United States." This means thousands of careers and jobs, in both public and private sectors, are dependent on producing results, and that means the hunt is greatly expanding. The weapons industry and related war profiteers have overarching economic motives, as well.

Removal of people for gain: While people actually believed in witchcraft during the Burning Times, there were also times when real power struggles and land issues

were involved. Some historians have concluded that societal instability was a factor in Europe: Most of the executions occurred in central Europe: in the German states, the Swiss Federation, parts of France, and in border regions between nation states during the Reformation when old views were challenged and there were power struggles between Catholicism and Protestantism. Today, the U.S. destabilizes regions as it expands its empire, conducting hunts on foreign soil to capture land, resources and power. Eliminating defenders of the land allows the land and its resources to fall into the hands of occupiers or prevents other powers like China from gaining access. This is the point of today's Great Hunt and Burning Times.

When will the Great Hunt and Burning Times of today end? The witch panics of the Great European Hunt finally ended in the last half of the seventeenth century. As our fellow human beings continue to be incarcerated or incinerated, a newly energized struggle is now on to put an end to the Great Hunt of our time. It's a hopeful sign that in public square encampments throughout the U.S. and the world, antiwar protesting is merging with protests over unequal distribution of wealth. The year-long slogan of the vocal group, Veterans for Peace, "How is the War Economy Working for You?" is beginning to have resonance. Occupiers of the Freedom Plaza encampment in Washington, D.C. demand an end to the human suffering caused by war. This October, the StoptheMachine movement filled the balconies of the Senate with protests, as well as stood up against military drones at the National Museum of Air and Space till they were arrested or forcefully dispersed. While people in other countries are burned alive by white phosphorous and other U.S./NATO incendiary weapons, protesters here may risk temporary trauma from having their eyes burned with pepper spray. But allowing the Burning Times of our era to continue is far more risky.

1 Witch panics spread to the American colonies, where an estimated 35 to 37 people were put to death.

2 Variations of this have been a dictum since the 13th century when it served as a call from Pope Innocent III to massacre heathens. It was adopted by secular authorities during witch crazes, and was used in the twentieth century by Green Berets and Marines.

Sources for historical information about the Burning Times from Behringer, Wolfgang (2004) Cambridge, UK: Parity Press. *Witches and Witch-Hunts: a global history*; Briggs, Robin (1996) *Witches & Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft*. New York: Penguin Books; Cohn, Norman (1975). *Europe's Inner Demons*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Gibbons, Jenny (1998). "Recent Developments in the Study of the Great European Witch Hunt."

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