

Exchange on the Material Basis of Women's Oppression

To the Editor:

You asked for comments on Jean Tepperman's article, "The Material Basis of Women's Oppression in Capitalist Society" (*TR* No. 23)—well, here goes.

I see Tepperman's article as a necessary first step that your trend must undertake to provide a coherent explanation of the patriarchal-capitalist-racist society under which we live. I think the editors correctly criticize PWOC for its class reductionism. I would also add Line of March to the list of economists on the "woman question," especially reading their strategy for fighting war and fascism. Anyway I applaud your efforts.

The article competently addresses the economist approach taken by the communist movement toward the oppression of women. But it doesn't add anything to the discussion of women's oppression under capitalism that hasn't already been established.

The editors were aware of the limitations of Tepperman's article: i.e., that her concept of "[three] basic material realities" (reproduction and childrearing, work in the home, and work for wages) if not fully developed is economist and limits any break with economism. I agree! The article is economist because it locates women's oppression in the production/reproduction of the labor force without addressing the production/reproduction of sexuality and psychic relations.

My major criticism of the article is the heterosexist assumptions about women and the lack of understanding about the role of heterosexism in reinforcing/maintaining the oppression of women under capitalist society (and "socialist" societies as well). Heterosexism is a fundamental "material reality" for almost all women.

First of all Tepperman *assumes* that women are married, working, and raising children. This is only one aspect of women's experience. Granted many women are married working mothers (or will be) and are oppressed on this level but it is theoretically inadequate/insufficient to extrapolate that experience for all women. Age factors in: from adolescents to older women who may be single, married, widowed, divorced, or somebody's sister or daughter. Class and race mediate this oppression as well.

Secondly, some women, by choice or circumstance, are not in sexual or "reproductive" relationships with men—lesbian women, women who spend their adult lives caring for an ailing family member, women who do not fit sexist standards of beauty (being older, "fat," "ugly," or

physically/mentally disabled), or women who are sterilized by choice or force. These are just some possibilities.

One thing all women share in capitalist society is heterosexist gender socialization. Not just feminine/masculine socialization although that is clearly connected. What heterosexist socialization means for women is that their major 'work' in life is to be in a relationship with a man. It means that men have *access* to a woman's body, to her domestic services, and her sexual and emotional energies whenever they want. It means that monogamous heterosexual relationships are considered normal while everything else is labeled deviant or made invisible.

Tepperman's article plays right into this rigid definition of women's sexuality which defines us as mothers, a biological definition that is sexist. Women are defined as sexual beings, not human beings.

In capitalist and "socialist" societies heterosexuality is the only legitimate avenue of sexual expression for women and by extension her basic means of survival. And it is enforced, at least implicitly, by violence. A glaring omission was Tepperman's example of Cuba. She mentions efforts at liberalizing social views of birth control and "illegitimate"(!) births. But she neglects to describe the until recent homophobia and consequent persecution/incarceration of gay and lesbian people by the state. Homosexuality was considered deviant, an example of bourgeois decadence.

An understanding of how heterosexism shapes a woman's consciousness is crucial before a developed analysis of women under capitalism can be sufficiently established. Marxists will have to break out of their male perspective before they will be able to understand what it is like to be a woman under capitalism and how her consciousness is shaped by the relations of reproduction/production.

My second criticism of Tepperman's elaboration of 'three basic material realities' is that she totally ignores the existence of sexual violence and how the threat of violence or actual violence intimidates women into passive obedience. In this country a woman is beaten every few seconds and raped every few minutes. Statistically the attacker is probably known to the woman and the violence occurs in his/her home. Women of color experience more violence than white women. Street and work harassment is on the increase. Objectively the message is: the public world is not safe for women. But for that matter neither is

the private sphere. For many women not only is home the place of endless drudge work but it is also where they face constant physical and psychic abuse. This is another example of the male perspective—for men home may be a “refuge” from capitalist work relations but it isn’t always so for women.

Violence is an everyday part of most women’s lives and materially shapes her lifestyle and consciousness. Sexual violence helps maintain a woman’s heterosexist consciousness in the sense that it personalizes her “faults,” setting up a dichotomy between good and bad behavior. It also sets up a distinction between good and bad men. “Good men,” don’t do such things and can be relied upon for protection. Violence keeps women in the home and out of the workforce especially at night, limiting their mobility and circumscribing their efforts at sexual and economic independence.

Of course sexual violence carries a contradictory potential as well. Many women are refusing to remain passive victims—witness the anti-violence and antiporn movement that has developed since the mid 1970s, the legal actions against work harassment (which wasn’t even a general concept until women gave it a name), the series of cases of women who murder their battering husbands in self-defense, and the increase of self-defense classes/equipment designed for women.

Related to sexual violence is racial violence. They overlap in a couple of ways. Racial genocide operates through women—women are sterilized proportionately more than men. Women of color have the least control over their bodies—especially with the repeal of Medicaid funded abortions and the high cost of quality health care. They have less access to “safe” methods of birth control (e.g., the exportation of copper IUD’s, birth control pills, DES to the Third World).

Secondly, there are far less opportunities to acquire jobs/job skills that will financially support a woman, let alone women with small children and possibly a dependent unemployed man. Many women of color are forced to go on AFDC because they cannot earn a living wage and have enough time to raise children. (In fact women of all colors make up the bulk of welfare recipients.) Instead of men, these women are often dependent on the state. Or else they are forced to lie about their emotional/financial dependence on men in order to retain their eligibility. The stress of poverty, unemployment, and racism makes it difficult to maintain stable nuclear family relations, particularly for black people. In this instance women of color’s relation to wage work and her family is mediated by race, sex, and class. Tepperman assumes that women are in stable family situations and can get a job whenever they want one. This isn’t so clear, especially now in times of high unemployment and the proletarianization and technological displacement of the workforce.

Although I don’t disagree with Tepperman’s choice of reproduction and childrearing, wage work, and housework to explain the oppression of women, I think it is insufficient because it leaves out the politics of (hetero)sexuality and violence against women. And because of some questionable assumptions it doesn’t adequately account for the experiences of lesbian women, younger and older women, women who aren’t married, women who aren’t mothers, and women of color. Ironically

Tepperman’s analysis comes awfully close to being ahistorical (a favorite charge leveled against radical feminists) because it doesn’t take into account women’s differing experiences under capitalism.

Marsha Rummel

Marsha Rummel has worked at a restaurant collective for two years and has been active in socialist and feminist politics for several years.

Dear Marsha:

Thanks for your comments on the Tepperman article. We think you raise some good points we’d like to share with our readers.

Tepperman’s paper is a critique of certain features of Marxist-Leninist theory and practice around sexism, mainly focusing on its economism, dogmatism, and male chauvinism. It was not meant to be a full analysis of women’s oppression, and that analysis would certainly require more elaboration of the areas you mention in your letter that are absent from her critique. In our introduction, and in the opening paragraphs of Tepperman’s article, we cite many of the same areas you do as being in need of a theoretical analysis from a Marxist perspective.

However, you correctly point out the heterosexism of much of the paper’s analysis, even though it mentions the need for an analysis of Gay Liberation by Marxists. You also emphasize the importance of a theoretical analysis of the violence against women which we fail to mention in our introduction and should have.

Regarding your comment to include violence against women and sexuality as part of women’s “basic material realities,” we think a whole new framework of analysis is more appropriate. Historically, the conception of “basic material realities” has been used to ignore the very issues you raise, as well as others similar to the ones you have mentioned. The way this conception has been traditionally defined has been partly responsible for the economism that has characterized the bulk of marxist analyses of women’s oppression. Clearly what is needed are new concepts that can embrace the full range and complexity of the experience and relations that constitute women’s situation in the modern world. We have continued our theoretical study of sexism since we wrote the introduction to Tepperman’s article, and hope to have a better framework and a broader analysis available for a summer issue of Theoretical Review.

The one point we would disagree with you on is that the article didn’t add anything to the discussion of women’s oppression that hasn’t already been established. What we felt was valuable in Tepperman’s work was that it theoretically articulated many of the causes for and effects of Marxist-Leninist failure in the struggle against sexism. Without this conscious elaboration, the left can not become effective in the struggle for Women’s Liberation, but will merely continue to alienate people, (feminists, Marxists, and those who are both), from working with them on what should be a common struggle for all.

*The Anti-Sexism Work Group
of the
Boston Political Collective*