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## Correspondence

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### An Exchange on Women's Oppression

Dear TR:

Three cheers for Jean Tepperman's article on the material basis of the oppression of women. Though perspectives like hers have appeared in other contexts in left literature, I have never seen an article which joins the issue from a Marxist-Leninist perspective so clearly. (Its shoddy treatment by the OCIC is shocking but unfortunately not surprising.) The chief value of her analysis is that, similar to Tepperman's analysis of Mary Inman's work, she makes women's labor and production in the home *clearly visible* to US Marxist-Leninists in a way in which it was not before. This is the absolutely indispensable basis for further work on this vital subject from a Marxist-Leninist perspective.

In light of this observation I would like to suggest in a very brief way some areas in which Tepperman's analysis can be extended. Firstly, her list of things produced in the home by women's labor (the bearing and rearing of children and housework) must be extended to include sexual gratification. Sexual gratification meets a human need and is produced by a definite human activity (labor). A similar though perhaps less clear case can be made for the inclusion of "nurturance" on the list, a concept developed by some feminist writers.

Secondly, once production in the home has become visible to Marxist science it is incumbent upon Marxists to use the concepts of that science to go beyond the empirical observation that such production actually takes place. We must do a historical materialist analysis of that production. Such an analysis must start with Marx's observation that no production takes place in general but always under definite relations of production. This observation must be extended to production in the home. Once it is recognized that relations of production exist in the home one needs only to identify the forces of production and their articulation with these relations to describe a mode of production in the home, a mode which exists as a subordinate mode of production and secures its conditions of existence, economic, political, and ideological, within the capitalist social formation. Unless we are willing to assert this mode is a communist one (i.e. classless) we are forced to identify class positions through analyzing the production and extraction of surplus labor in the home. Indeed it is only through the extraction of surplus labor that men can be said (as Tepperman does) to benefit in a way disproportionate to their contribution from the production of women in the home. We must then analyze the impact of the existence of these class positions and their conditions of existence within

the social formation on the course of the class struggle and capitalism in particular.

Keep up the exciting work.

In solidarity,

Terrence McLoughlin  
Northampton, Mass.

Dear Terry:

Thanks for your letter. We agree that Tepperman's analysis needs to be extended to include sexual relations and sexuality. However, we find the use of the terms labor and production inadequate and inappropriate for analysing sexual relations. Using the terms in this way is not compatible with the Marxist concepts to which these terms are applied. Although we can't use the same terms, we certainly do want to make sexual oppression visible; just as Marx's terms make economic exploitation visible.

At this point in our theoretical work, we have serious disagreements with most of the theories that have been articulated centering women's oppression outside capitalism in a separate mode of production, and defining women as a separate class, as with Christine Delphy, John Harrison and others, because they tend to reduce male/female relations to class relations. This approach doesn't explain gender division and gender hierarchy. Gender divisions do not simply spring directly from class relations.

These theories also pose political problems. If men's oppression of women in the family is viewed as some form of class oppression, then male capitalists and male workers can be said to share the same class location and class interests within this separate family structure. While it is true that men of different classes share common benefits in the oppression of women, just as women of different class locations share common forms of oppression, to call these oppressive relations *class* relations is to confuse the Marxist sense of the term class, and open the door to non-revolutionary strategies. For example, it could lead to a strategy for women's liberation that targets men as the main enemy. While we know that women do need to struggle with men on many issues, our task is to show how the struggle for women's liberation is bound up with the struggle against capitalism. Marxists recognize that there are no "pure" capitalist social formations, and that the capitalist mode always exists in articulation with other modes of production.

Although we reject the class reductionist approach to the theory of a domestic mode of production, this does not mean to say that there couldn't have been previous modes of production that were based primarily in the household where patriarchal relations did dominate the production relations. Thus, it is important to explore how these earlier patriarchal production relations in the household became incorporated into current relations of production in the household under capitalism.

The most common form of an alternative to the domestic mode of production theory, however, tends to elevate women's oppression in the family to an absolute, ignoring both the way the family is specifically structured under capitalism and women's oppression outside the family. It is

true that the family is a key site of women's oppression, but this does not support a theory of women's oppression that rests itself entirely on that basis. For example, many socialist feminists see Marxism as the appropriate science for class relations, while a feminist analysis of patriarchy is the appropriate science for the history of relations in the family. The next step is to insert the family or patriarchy back into a capitalist social formation, explaining how women are oppressed separately in these dual systems.

There are many problems with seeing women's oppression in a separate sphere as the starting point. This leads to a tendency to view women's oppression as completely, rather than relatively, autonomous. It ignores the fact that it was the rise of the capitalist system that established the family as a "private" sphere in the first place. This approach can't explain the links between the dominant forces of the class struggle and changes in the household. It also can't explain gender oppression and hierarchy that exists outside of the family. It does not explain why it is women, and not others, that are in the subordinate role in the first place.

We think that the family is a key site in developing gender identity, division, and hierarchy. Feminist theory has a great deal to offer us on this, as well as other areas. At the same time, gender divisions, while distinct, never exist apart from class relations either. A Marxist approach from our perspective would have to analyze the relative autonomy of gender relations from class relations, and show the historical roles that the class struggle and the women's struggle have played in influencing the form and development of gender divisions under capitalism. Very briefly, that is the direction our theoretical/political work in Boston is headed right now, and we are only speaking for ourselves. We plan to have a much more comprehensive presentation of our ideas in the future.

We also look forward to the deepening of the debates that have been opened here, and encourage you and others to contribute further comments and criticisms.

In friendship,  
The Anti-Sexism Work Group  
of the Boston Political  
Collective

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