

Di Bello



SEXISM AND IMPERIALISM

Anti-Imperialist Committee of

CHICAGO WOMEN'S LIBERATION UNION
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Whether we're always fully conscious of it or not, ours is an anti-imperialist movement. This is not just because we hate the manifestations of Imperialism, or even because we understand that it is the external thrust which makes the continued growth of capitalism possible. Imperialism is The Enemy for us just as it is for the peoples we normally think of as coming from the Third World.

What we have to do now, and until both imperialism and sexism are destroyed, is explore the connections between the two, and make what we find the basis of our vision and our practice. What I'm going to do is to make suggestions about the areas which we should begin to explore.

Our main focus is going to be the Vietnamese War, since this represents the clearest example of the type of Imperialism most closely related to our movement, American Neo-colonialism. But the broad outlines are the same for the Algerian War of Liberation against France, the struggle of Guinea and Mozambique against the Portuguese, the plight of Latin America. We should try to draw on these and other cases in building our analysis of the ways in which sexism has reinforced imperialism and become an integral part of the system which maintains it.

The generalized oppression of the whole South Vietnamese population is obviously the context in which women suffer a particular type of oppression. Total social dislocation -- Nixon's policy of "pacification" by saturation bombing which might be more accurately described as genocide -- not yet totally systematic nor yet even very efficient but still genocide. Toxic gasses bring new diseases and birth defects. Inflation has reached an incredible high -- food is so short that rice has to be imported from that willing merchang, the U.S.A.

But aside from the massive physical destruction, a war is being fought against the fabric of Vietnamese society, an attempt to break down social values and weaken resistance to a remaking of society in the American image, and subject to American needs. This war uses women as instruments for a particular kind of attack. First prostitution. There are now about 400,000 prostitutes in Vietnam, roughly one for every G.I. These women are driven to prostitution because of the impact of the war on their society & their existence helps to weaken societal ties. They, and other women too, are taught to dispise their own culture, their own standards of beauty, to dress and behave as Western women, consuming American products to fulfill a perverted image of American womanhood.

Even more significant is the American use of sexual brutality, to demonstrate naked power. Rapes probably occur in all wars; certainly most colonial wars which are more than mere raiding missions involve an attempt to dislocate through attacking the structure of society. But in Vietnam the two are put together to a degree which seems to be unique. Mass rapes are said to have become "part of the fighting taxk" for American G.I.s. Whether this is explicit policy of merely the development of a permissive and suggestive atmosphere doesn't seem to matter much.

For our purposes the important point is that the Vietnamese women are treated with the utmost contempt, as an expression of contempt for the entire Vietnamese society. Their bodies are impaled on stakes driven from vagina to throat, publicly displayed to shock and to quell. If the potential Vietcong constituency cannot be won over, then the society must be destroyed. Women are the agents. This kind of bestial psychological warfare is especially sickening when one remembers the uses to which mass outrage are put in this country to legitimize policy. One remembers the hysteria over the rumored behavior towards women of "primitive" black troops in the Congo in 1964 at the time of the airlift out of the country -- or the degree to which the "communist menace" depends on the same sort of manipulation of popular consciousness. Through raping and torturing women systematically GIs become brutalized and demoralized to a degree which makes acceptance of the tasks which fall to them possible. Rape, the age-old demonstration of the connection between sex and power becomes a mechanism of total warfare.

Women undergoing tortures are taunted with "This will make you sterile" -- an attempt to break them down by playing on their biological and social role. Maternal feelings are manipulated -- babies are tortured in front of their mothers; children in jail with their mothers are given no food.

The aim is, beyond total demoralization, to force women to plea for surrender on any terms. There is some sort of basis here in the historic political role of women in the American nuclear-family-based society -- women as safety-valve against rebellion, the transmitters of conservative values. Yet Vietnamese women have found strength to continue to organize, widening their struggle. One of their peace organizations is called simply, "Committee of Women to Defend the Right to Live."

American women too feel the direct impact of the war. Women who work are at the bottom of the labor hierarchy and are the first to lose their jobs in a recession. Unemployment figures for full time, full year employed women have risen this year from 4.8% in January (1970) to 6.4% in September. The partime figure (certainly a sizable majority of people involved here would be women) is 10.2%. Because of their low earning power, inflation, a direct result of the war, hits women hardest. We're all aware of price rises -- figures reinforce this. In terms of expenditure on health, for instance, \$100 would buy the same amount of health care in 1957 as \$167 today. In this war period the problems of inflation have not been tackled partly because the imposition of controls which might hit politically influential sections of the population would probably lead to criticism of the war. For the Administration the war must not be allowed to become a universal scapegoat -- it might fail to justify its existence.

So women are particularly susceptible to fluctuations of the economy. In the wartime situation, the fact that most women also live -- and are expected to live -- in nuclear family situations, makes the problem of subsistence almost insurmountable for those whose men are killed, maimed or captured in Vietnam. Because of the high proportion of black troops in the front lines, black women, for whom the labor problem is far worse even than for white women, suffer particularly. There are few socially acceptable alternatives to isolated struggle to survive. Defense and offense expenditures (up 1 billion to \$81 billion in 1969) has cut those aid programs which do exist, and prevented social measures which might ease the burden, though not cut through the contradictions implicit in the nuclear family as an economic unit when the most effective breadwinner is removed.

Michelle
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Those women whose men return have to face the results of the brutalizing experience of the war. Those whose men remain in Vietnam as POWs find themselves the center of an impotent and vicious propaganda campaign, aimed at building support for the continuance of extension of the war under the guise of care about the fate of the prisoners. This campaign has reached a new high in the last few weeks as emotions are manipulated to distract attention from real issues.

Obviously the fact that American women can be exploited in this way raises the question of our relationship to the whole imperialist structure. Our situation helped to make imperialism possible in the first place. There are great similarities between this situation and the situation of all peoples subordinated to imperialist rule -- similarities which suggest that the same basic process is at work. Women function in many ways as an internal colony of the United States -- and a colony which provides a stepping stone to further expansion.

Capitalism needs the flexibility of a cheap -- and dispensible -- labor force to survive. It needs an unpaid domestic labor force in the home. It also needs a tame and easily manipulated consumer force -- women are responsible for 75% of the purchase of consumer goods in this country. In their homes they are a captive audience for manipulation of this spending power through the media. Yet in order to grow, and protect itself against the crisis of underconsumption at home, to create new demands and new investment opportunities in industries which will meet those demands, capitalism must expand, as international imperialism. The export of American culture both breaks down resistance to external control by dissolving traditional cultures, and stimulates demand for American consumer goods as we've seen in Vietnam. The historic driving force of Imperialism has been a search for cheap labor, raw materials, and new markets -- ever since the trashy new mass products of the Industrial Revolution in England opened up vast areas of economic and political influence throughout the world. This vital dynamic of foreign growth is made possible by the existence of captive and easily manipulable sections of the population at home, among which women are a major factor.

The instilling of capitalist values invariably accompanies the stimulation of consumerism. Women learn to compete, to value their isolation in the family and their lack of independence as a type of fulfillment. Colonized peoples are divided too, and taught to vie with each other on the Western pattern, whatever their traditional communal values may have been. The basic aim of the U.S. seems to be to reproduce its own class structure overseas, insofar as this is compatible with subordination. The development of a bourgeoisie brings "stability" in American terms, strong elements with a stake in the system and a market for middle class consumer products -- automobiles for example.

Not only this -- having done its best to destroy the confidence of the society in itself, the American government proclaims to the world its doubts about the maturity of the Vietnamese people, their ability to make free decisions about the alternatives open to them. This expression of self-interest thinly disguised by racist paternalism hits exactly the same tone used by the British in debating the merits and demerits of "One Man One Vote" in the African colonies.

It is a tone familiar to us as women too. Our acquiescence in the development and existence of an imperialist society and our acceptance of subordination faced by competitive values stems from our conditioning. We have no confidence in ourselves and thus can be easily manipulated and demoralized. We can be used as a force which protects the system and convinced that we cannot make the correct decisions.

We are taught that we are weak, childlike, and in need of protection. We have no means of self-defense, and are discouraged from even thinking of acquiring any. We seek our protection in the nuclear family, the only area in which we feel any security. We are taught to fear contacts outside that area -- to teach our children to meet outsiders with suspicion, to be closed off from free human contacts between individuals. Because of the racism of this society, white women especially fear non-white individuals, and thus societies, black, brown or yellow. We dare not think of the horrors of life outside our world -- or in an attempt to right those distant wrongs what little security we have might be threatened. This mythology about the home becomes a reality to the woman imprisoned in it, physically or psychically. And it has important political consequences -- quietism. This has historically been a pressure of control on men too-- "Don't strike, how shall we eat?" "Don't rebel; remember the wife and kids."

Thus imperialism is shored up through our openness to pacification, to the lulling voice of the sympathetic news commentator who feels our emotions for us, and stops them getting out of hand. We are so fucked over that all decent emotions are distorted, thwarted by the needs of an ugly war, and by the campaigns that went before it. We are open to the false rhetoric which speaks of "motherland" "American boys," "peace" flagrantly manipulating feminine values. This has prevented American women from seeing the contradictions which lead this same mother-loving society to send their sons to death, maiming, or brutal personality distortion in Vietnam. Even the emotions which women traditionally are allowed to have, have been stilled or perverted by rhetoric and manipulation.

It is very important that we see that our solidarity with the Vietnamese is based on our own oppression. Traditionally imperialists have tried to prevent any sort of solidarity from forming internationally between groups in the imperial country and colonial peoples. In the 1890s in England workers were taught that minor gains in social welfare and purchasing power were due to the growth of imperialism. Thus the aristocracy of labor held out no hand to the oppressed of the third world. This manipulation must not happen to us. It is crucial that we realize our own lack of self-defense, the fact that this is used to justify an aggressive foreign policy in the name of protecting us. Then we will understand that being defenseless allows one to be victimized in the name of salvation. So we see that we and the Vietnamese are fighting the same battle -- not to be "protected", not to be defended, not to be infantilized, while being massively exploited -- to gain self-determination. We have to challenge the legitimacy of the American government to speak for us as women, to withhold information and power from us.

Above all we have to make the anti-imperialist struggle our struggle, by our own involvement. We have to work on programmatic ways in which this commitment can be made, through which women can understand the close relationship between imperialism and sexism. This means closely integrated program based on the increasing consciousness of ourselves as women and of what the struggle means.

N.V. how unite women: Before R.E.V. a women's league for Nat. Salvation; formerly, mostly poor involved; also based on class exp. & patriotism to educate; (also petty bourgeoisie) liberated - league embraced all sorts of people for lib'n of country. In 1946 became Union; larger & larger