

CONTEMPORARY MARXIST THEORY

Week 10. Feminism, Marxism, Postmodernism

1. One of the main concerns of socialist feminism has been to provide a theory of the material basis of women's oppression ("patriarchy") and of the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism. Critically evaluate the different perspectives of Zillah Eisenstein, Heidi Hartmann, and Iris Young on these issues, identifying general areas of agreement as well as significant points of disagreement. Which perspective to you find most persuasive and why?

2. Contrast the analyses of Heidi Hartmann and Jane Humphries on the historical origins of the "family wage" and the restriction of women's participation in wage employment. Who most benefits from the persistence of the working class family according to Hartmann and Humphries? Which of these two arguments do you find most persuasive and why?

3. What is the "real material basis of patriarchy and capital" according to Harding? Do you agree that her theory is indeed materialist, rather than psychological in the usual sense? If Harding is right, what are the implications for political practice and what are the prospects for transforming both patriarchy and capitalism?

4. Many (perhaps most) feminists have been wary of postmodernism because of its dismissal of Enlightenment views of progress, its rejection universal categories like "women" or "women's oppression," and its pessimism regarding the prospects for progressive politics. What arguments does Jane Flax present for the possibility of rapprochement between feminism and postmodernism? Are you persuaded by her arguments? Why or why not?