

## ***Production and Patriarchy in Capitalist Society: A Comparative Review of Hartmann and Young***

***Gary Blank***

The social struggles associated with the New Left in the late 1960s and early 1970s sparked a popular resurgence of Marxist and feminist theory and practice. In the early phase of these struggles, many left-wing social activists regarded the two traditions as inherently compatible, and urged (or even assumed) their “marriage”<sup>1</sup>. Over the following decade, however, socialist feminists noted that the marriage was at the very least “unhappy”, sparking a vigorous debate over the extent to which the “sex-blind” categories of Marxism could be utilized to address feminist concerns. This review essay assesses two foundational contributions to the debate: Heidi Hartmann’s “dual systems” theory and Iris Young’s “single system” response<sup>2</sup>. While the two accounts are seemingly counter posed, a comparative analysis of their respective strengths and weaknesses points the way toward a truly historical materialist theory of women’s oppression in capitalist society. Such a theory must seek to explain the material basis for a specifically capitalist patriarchy, without employing trans-historical structures (as Hartmann does) or functionalist reasoning (as Young does). In the end, I suggest that an alternative Marxist framework can be utilized to integrate the greatest insights of both accounts, while overcoming their debilitating limitations.

---

<sup>1</sup> For background on this social and political context, see Lydia Sargent, “New Left Women and Men: The Honeymoon is Over” in Sargent (ed.), *Women and Revolution: A discussion of the unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism* (Montreal: Black Rose, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> For Hartmann’s contribution, see “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union” in Sargent (ed.). For Young, see “Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: A Critique of Dual Systems Theory” in Sargent (ed.), and “Socialist Feminism and the Limits of Dual Systems Theory,” in Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham (eds.), *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women’s Lives* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

Heidi Hartmann's essay, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism", is undoubtedly one of the key touchstones in socialist feminist thought and of feminist political economy in general. Although her specific articulation of "dual systems" theory has largely fallen out of favor, it was the first systematic attempt to overcome the limitations of various Marxist approaches to the "woman question," and thereby gave voice to a generation of academics and activists who had concluded that "Marxism and feminism are one, and that one is Marxism"<sup>3</sup>.

Hartmann notes that while not all Marxists have ignored women's oppression, they have usually taken as their question the relationship of women to the economic system, rather than that of women to men (the "feminist question"). Women's oppression cannot be adequately understood as simply "another aspect" of class oppression<sup>4</sup>. Marxism, as theory of the development of class society, enables an understanding of capitalism's "laws of motion": the structure of production, the generation of a particular occupational structure, etc. However, these categories are sex-blind, and can only trace the development of "empty places"<sup>5</sup>. Why these places are occupied by particular sexes can only be explained by reference to patriarchy as a *distinct* system of social relations between men. Like capitalism, patriarchy too has a material base, predicated upon male control of female labor power and maintained by excluding women from access to essential productive resources and restricting women's sexuality<sup>6</sup>. Although Hartmann suggests that a "healthy and strong" relationship exists between patriarchy and capital, the partnership was not inevitable. Both working class men and capitalists sought to secure their claim on female labor power in the early days of industrial capitalism, and this competition was only resolved with the adoption of the "family wage" norm. Lower wages compelled women to choose wifery as a career, while also ensuring a future labor force for capital<sup>7</sup>.

There is much to value in Hartmann's account. While she may paint "Marxism" with too broad a brush at times, she is certainly justified in pointing out that traditional Marxism has often been "sex-blind" theoretically and politically. Asking the "feminist question" opens a whole field of

---

<sup>3</sup> Hartmann, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

social relations that had previously been ignored, and is therefore of immense importance for social-scientific inquiry as a whole. Hartmann also delivers a strong critique of the radical feminist answer to this question, correctly suggesting that previous theories of patriarchy were profoundly ahistorical, projecting “male and female characteristics as they appear in the present back into all of history”<sup>8</sup>. Her resulting conclusion that neither traditional Marxism, nor radical feminism has offered a sufficient explication of capitalist patriarchy, and her call for a *materialist* analysis of men acting *as men* and as active oppressors of women, must be taken seriously by those seeking to develop an historical materialist understanding of women’s oppression. The strongest aspect of Hartmann’s account, for our purposes, is her compelling refutation of functionalist analysis. Hartmann allows for an analysis of the abstract tendencies of capitalism as a mode of production, while insisting that these tendencies do not in themselves *require* women’s subordination. In a particularly pertinent passage, Hartmann notes that “Capital accumulation encounters pre-existing social forms and both destroys them and adapts to them. The adaptation of capital can be seen as a reflection of the *strength* of these pre-existing forms to persevere in new environments”<sup>9</sup>. This opens the door to an historical account of how capitalism instantiates and transforms patriarchy, rather than why capitalism somehow logically requires patriarchy.

Unfortunately, while Hartmann does make recourse to historical examples, her account is more structural than historical. The pivotal series of events in the construction of patriarchal capitalism, according to Hartmann, were those associated with the “family wage”. However, the formation of this wage norm (which was in fact the norm for only a small minority<sup>10</sup>) appears less as a product of an historical *process* than as an articulation of two distinct systemic structures (“dual systems”). This has at least two problematic implications. The first is in accounting for the origins and dynamics of the structures themselves. Hartmann, of course, implicitly accepts the Marxist historicization of capitalism; but her account of patriarchy is essentially ahistorical, and only differs from that of the radical feminists in its identification of male “material” interests, rather than psychological or biological characteristics, as the driving force behind male’s oppressive behavior. The problem here lies not with the suggestion that patriarchy must have some material root, but rather with the notion that men oppress women as a group, with a single (and seemingly

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> See Lindsey German, *Sex, Class and Socialism* (London: Bookmarks, 1994), p. 36.

eternal) motive force. Like the radical feminists, Hartmann seems to assume the motivating force underlying patriarchy, rather than seeking to explain the origins and dynamics of that force itself. Interestingly, while Hartmann references the actions and rhetoric of the Cigarmakers International Union (CMIU) as a textbook example of male patriarchy in action<sup>11</sup>, Johanna Brenner points out that this was hardly a universal response among male unionists. Even within the cigar-making industry, a union called La Resistencia, formed in Tampa by radicalized Cuban émigrés, sought to organize female tobacco strippers and lampooned the CMIU as “the voice of virile labor”<sup>12</sup>. Male patriarchal “interest” was not fixed, but was contested and redefined in the context of industrial and class struggle across gender boundaries.

This complex and dynamic interaction of gender and class oppression highlights a second problem in Hartmann’s account. By sharply separating two distinct material structures (capitalism/production of goods and patriarchy/production of people), dual systems theory is unable to trace the dynamic integration of the two within a single socio-economic system of production and reproduction<sup>13</sup>. This does not mean that we should not make an analytical distinction between production and reproduction—*under capitalism* the two have indeed become uniquely separated. However, in previous class-stratified societies (i.e., all of those predicated upon the politically-mediated exploitation of peasant labor in one form or another), patriarchal norms were inextricably tied to the production of goods as well as people. Reference to two, trans-historically-separated systems of production of people/goods inhibits an appreciation of capitalism’s specificity, and therefore provides an inadequate understanding of the relationship between patriarchy and capital.

Some of these concerns are taken up by Iris Young in her critique of Hartmann’s dual systems model. Young draws attention to a glaring tension in Hartmann’s analysis: while Hartmann insists on the separation of capitalism and patriarchy, she nevertheless admits that both are

---

<sup>11</sup> Hartmann, p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> See Johanna Brenner, *Women and the Politics of Class* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), p. 93. For more on the family wage, see Brenner and Maria Ramas, “Rethinking Women’s Oppression” *New Left Review*, No. 144 (March-April 1984): 33-71.

<sup>13</sup> For a short critique along these lines, see Meg Luxton, “Feminist Political Economy in Canada and the Politics of Social Reproduction” in Kate Bezanson, and Luxton (eds.), *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neo-Liberalism* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), p. 27.

manifest in identical social and economic structures<sup>14</sup>. Any attempt to “isolate the mechanisms of patriarchy,” as Hartmann counsels<sup>15</sup>, is therefore misguided. Far better to recognize that class domination and relations of production and distribution, on the one hand, and women’s oppression, on the other, are aspects of “the same socio-economic system”<sup>16</sup>. Patriarchal relations are therefore “internally related” to production relations as a whole<sup>17</sup>. Hartmann’s central error, according to Young, is in accepting the Marxist theory of production. Class analysis is simply too abstract to capture the relations of production and material bases of domination. Pointing to Marx’s early emphasis on the division of labor in *The German Ideology*, Young maintains that a more concrete investigation at the level of the sexual division of labor is best equipped to explain women’s oppression. At this level of analysis, the category “relations of production” refers to “any task or activity which the society defines as necessary”, therefore encompassing not just factory production but also “traditional women’s tasks” (i.e., unpaid domestic labor)<sup>18</sup>. From this perspective, capitalism does not simply use, or adapt to, pre-existing gender hierarchies; it was *founded* on gender hierarchies, and generates forms of gender oppression which are “essential to its nature”<sup>19</sup>.

Young’s critique of Hartmann is compelling. Her central thesis—that class domination and women’s oppression need to be analyzed as aspects of the same socio-economic system—helps to overcome Hartmann’s ahistorical and under-theorized notion of a separate patriarchal system. Yet the efficacy of this approach is largely dependent upon how the dynamics of this single system are explained. It is of course true that the division of labor operates at a more concrete level than that of class analysis, and can therefore be fruitfully utilized to analyze the social relations of labor in gender specific forms. Yet class and division of labor analyses should not be counter-posed. If division of labor analysis is to offer an *explanation* of women’s place in capitalist society (rather than merely a description of the same), it is necessary to rely upon some underlying (and analytically prior) theorization of class relations.

---

<sup>14</sup> Young, “Beyond,” p. 47.

<sup>15</sup> Hartmann, p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> Young, “Beyond,” p. 56.

<sup>17</sup> Young, “Beyond,” p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

As some Marxists have pointed out, a central problem of Marx's reliance upon division of labor analysis in *The German Ideology* is his implicit reliance upon a liberal materialist understanding of class relations<sup>20</sup>. If Young does not rely upon a liberal materialist conception of class, it is only because her entire theorization of class relations remains muddled and unspecified. It is certainly valuable and necessary to affirm that women's unpaid household labor is as socially necessary as factory production; but it is also essential to point out that factory labor is subject to directly capitalist imperatives, while household labor is not. In the end, Young's "explanation" of women's situation in capitalism does rest upon class analysis, albeit of a purely structural-functional variety. Referencing the work of Heleieth Saffioti<sup>21</sup>, Young suggests that the key to understanding women's situation is the capitalist system's requirement for a reserve army of labor. Patriarchal ideology and the burdens of childcare "operated to make sex the most natural criterion by which to divide the workforce"<sup>22</sup>. It seems as though we have come full circle, with Young (inadvertently) returning to the reductionism and functionalism of the orthodox Marxists that Hartmann had so trenchantly criticized.

Both Hartmann and Young make considerable strides in formulating an historical materialist understanding of women's oppression, but in the end neither contributor provides a solid theoretical base for such an understanding. Still, taking stock of their respective strengths and weaknesses helps to clarify the major issues that require resolution. Hartmann, it was suggested, had usefully pointed out the need to address the "feminist question" in a materialist manner, while avoiding the crude class reductionism of traditional Marxist accounts. Crucially important is Hartmann's observation that patriarchy cannot simply be deduced from the logic of capital, but may have its origins in social forms that precede (but are nevertheless transformed by) capitalist development. However, Hartmann's trans-historical conception of male material "interest" only begs the question, and ultimately inhibits the sort of historical investigation she would seem to encourage. For her part, Young argues strenuously against the notion that patriarchy is a structure unto itself, and correctly urges that class and sex oppression be analyzed as facets of a single socio-economic system. Yet, the dynamics and causal processes which drive this system remain largely

---

<sup>20</sup> Cf. George C. Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge* (London: Verso, 1987), p. 155-9.

<sup>21</sup> See Heleieth Saffioti, *Women in Class Society* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), p. 115.

<sup>22</sup> Young, "Beyond," p. 58.

unspecified; thick description (division of labor analysis) is overlain with an exceedingly thin functionalism (the reserve army requirements of capital).

How, then, to develop a materialist theory of women's oppression that is attentive to both the "feminist question" and the specificity of capitalism, but avoids lapsing into reductionism, functionalism, or structuralism? Although a full answer to this question would of course require another paper, here we can at least point the way forward. The most problematic aspects in both Hartmann and Young were prompted by a common assertion that the sex-blind categories of Marxism are inadequate to the task of explaining gendered social relations. Given the inadequacies of Marxist concepts, entirely new structures and processes had to be given prominence (trans-historical patriarchy and the gender division of labor). But in what way are Marxist categories sex-blind, and does this actually render them incapable of explaining women's oppression? Previous Marxist analyses of the "woman question" departed, like Hartmann, from Engels' flawed notion that there was a sharp separation between the production of goods and the production of people with the emergence of class society, and that this separation corresponded to male and female spheres. Focusing on the production of goods as the material "base" of the mode of production, these accounts were certainly sex-blind, and this blindness precluded an adequate understanding of production itself. More recent scholarship in the "political Marxist" tradition has challenged this sharp distinction between base and superstructure, the production of people and the production of goods, and has called attention to the different ways in which direct producers and exploiters sought to reproduce themselves, given certain overarching structures of politically-mediated exploitation<sup>23</sup>. Although these accounts have often understated women's oppression, they nevertheless provide a framework for understanding patriarchal forms and gender relations as *defining* features of pre-capitalist modes of exploitation.

However, like Young, "political Marxists" have noted the specificity of capitalism in its separation of production from reproduction, as well as the "political" from the "economic." These separations point to something unique about capitalism: unlike all previous modes of exploitation, its abstract "laws of motion" can be explained without *direct* reference to political and ascriptive factors. In this respect, the sex-blind categories of Marxism, when used to describe the specificity of *capitalism*, are not only analytically justified but necessary if we are to truly understand its

---

<sup>23</sup> For an outline, see Robert Brenner, "Property and Progress: Where Adam Smith Went Wrong" in Chris Wickham (ed.), *Marxist History-Writing for the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 49-111.

dynamics. Indeed, Ben Fine<sup>24</sup>, Johanna Brenner and Maria Ramas have convincingly argued that the sex-blind Marxist categories permit a dynamic understanding of women's oppression that correct many of the shortcomings of dual system and single system analyses. Brenner in particular has shown how capitalist imperatives and class conflict have yielded changing patterns of gender relations and gendered work in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as men and women of all classes employed distinct "strategies of self-representation"<sup>25</sup>. Taken together, these scattered political Marxist and Marxist-feminist contributions have demonstrated that it is possible to take class relations of exploitation as the point of departure in understanding women's oppression in pre-capitalist as well as capitalist societies. Their synthesis in an alternative Marxist framework may yet provide answers to the unresolved theoretical and political questions of socialist feminism.

### **Bibliography**

Bezanson, Kate and Luxton (eds.). *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neo-Liberalism*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006.

Brenner, Johanna. *Women and the Politics of Class*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.

Brenner, Johanna and Maria Ramas. "Rethinking Women's Oppression". *New Left Review*, No. 144 (March-April 1984): 33-71.

Brenner, Robert. "Property and Progress: Where Adam Smith Went Wrong". In Chris Wickham (ed.).

Comninel, George C. *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge*. London: Verso, 1987.

---

<sup>24</sup> See Ben Fine, *Women's Employment and the Capitalist Family* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Johanna Brenner, p. 92.

German, Lindsey. *Sex, Class and Socialism*. London: Bookmarks, 1994.

Hartmann, Heidi. "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union". In Sargent (ed.)

Hennessy, Rosemary and Chrys Ingraham (eds.). *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference and Women's Lives*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Luxton, Meg. "Feminist Political Economy in Canada and the Politics of Social Reproduction". In Kate Bezanson, and Luxton (eds.).

Saffioti, Heleith. *Women in Class Society*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978.

Sargent, Lydia. "New Left Women and Men: The Honeymoon is Over." In Sargent (ed.).

----- (ed.). *Women and Revolution: A discussion of the unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism*. Montreal: Black Rose, 1981.

Wickham, Chris (ed.). *Marxist History-Writing for the Twenty-first Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Young, Iris. "Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: A Critique of Dual Systems Theory". In Sargent (ed.).

----- "Socialist Feminism and the Limits of Dual Systems Theory". In Hennessy and Ingraham (eds.).