ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

The Politics of Reproduction

Mary O'Brien

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First published in 1981, *The Politics of Reproduction* is a critique of traditional political thought. It focuses centrally upon the nature and difference of male and female experience of biological reproduction, and upon the impact of male reproductive experience on the theory and practice of politics.

Mary O'Brien presents a controversial revision of dialectical materialism, arguing that Marx, as a charter-member of an exclusively masculine tradition of political thought, could not provide the theoretical grounds for true social reformation. Only feminism, she argues, is currently a major progressive force in western history: the impact of reproductive technology on female consciousness is a world historical event which must be given theoretical and political expression.

The new model of historical process offered here, in preliminary form, gives due weight to the struggle of the sexes which has its historical reality in the separation of public and private life. The model is founded on an analysis of male-stream thought from the Athenian polis to our own day, and it makes possible a radical interpretation of contemporary women's experience that never lapses into either a historicism or simple rage.

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To my aunts – Bertie, Eleanor, May –
who taught me that women are strong

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Introduction

This book is about theory, but it is not a book intended only for theorists. It is about and for women. I acknowledge at once that this creates difficulties. Theory is an off-putting kind of word, for a number of people. Any university teacher will admit that to put the word theory in a course title is automatically to ensure a small enrolment in the course. What then happens is that theory appears in disguise, for the truth is that the acquisition of any body of systematic knowledge depends on the espoused conceptions of theory and method. This is widely regarded as a drag, and the inseparability of theory and method itself is not at all well understood. In the 1960s, the great decade of relevance, much theoretical activity was labelled irrelevant, and, indeed, many of the arid academic fantasies which claimed the title of theory were irrelevant.

Theory can be and often is perceived as a playing about with a bunch of abstractions which have no relation to the lives we lead and are no help in realizing the things which are dear to our hearts. In political theory, which is the sort of theory with which I am mainly concerned here, we have, as an example, dozens of theories on the nature and desirability of human freedom. We do not, however, actually have human freedom, and we are not even very sure what freedom is or ought to be like. So what is the use of theories of freedom which, over many centuries, have had no discernible impact on the creation of freedom? Better, perhaps – and this is a notion which appeals especially to women, for whom freedom, if it exists at all, appears to be a male prerogative – better, perhaps, to work for freedom than to waste time

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thinking about it. Or, maybe more sensibly, let's acknowledge that there is no such thing and make the best of what we have.

It is not, though, only the perceptions of university students and impatient activitists, nor the failures of theorizing in the past, which have made theory unpopular. We live in the Scientific Age, and scientific theory is, on the surface, different from what we might call traditional theory. Scientific theory is a way of organizing what actually is in such a manner that we can not only understand it better, but can apply this understanding in practical ways: we can predict, for example, what will actually happen if a certain series of events occur. This can be quite simple or enormously sophisticated. We can predict that if water is heated to a certain temperature it will begin to bubble, and we don't have to stop and think that the *idea* of temperature is a theoretical notion. This is obviously different in degree from predicting that a great parcel of electronic hardware shot off from the mainland of the United States of America will start orbiting around Mars at a particular time. Yet in both cases a theoretical perception and organization of physical events make these outcomes possible.

The success story of science in the modern era has been important in forming our idea of what theory is and ought to be. Scientific values, often lurking as objective facts, passed into the social sciences as they developed in the nineteenth century, and there was great optimism that social science would be able to do for the social world what natural science had done for the physical world. We should surely be able to gain enough understanding of how the social world worked to be able to predict how events would turn out under clearly defined sets of circumstances, just as we had done in the case of the natural world. This early optimism has abated a little, but it is not the question of positivism versus speculation which is our main concern here. What is of concern to us is the fate of traditional theorizing under the onslaught of triumphant scientism. For traditional theory took quite a shellacking. It was argued that theory of this kind did not relate to anything real, but was largely high-class daydreaming with little or no practical application. It was argued that science is objective and describes what is, whereas traditional theory is subjective and describes what ought to be, and why should any one person's theory of what ought to be be any better than any other person's? Theory is not only inexact, but elitist, favouring intellectualism over common sense.

These considerations are of interest here only in so far as they contribute to the low status of theorizing in our own times. People have in fact never stopped theorizing, and a lot of critical theorizing is now done about some of the more vulgar assumptions about scientific thought which I have just summarized. None the less, the aversion to theory is, from the perspective which I want to develop here, an important social reality. This is because of its significance in relation to contemporary feminism. Women have fought and clawed their way into the citadels of male intellectualism, only to find that the cupboards in the ivory towers are on the bare side. Tolerated in token numbers in the world of the disciplined mind, women have been told that there are 2,000 years or so of intellectual history which men have created and are now prepared to let women share, thoughtfully saving us the bother of doing it all over again. Included in this package is the contemporary view of the poverty of traditional thought. True, there are pockets of this world which retain commitments to theorizing on a somewhat grander scale; Marxism is one and existentialism another. However, and in North America particularly, social science has largely decided that what counts is what can be counted, preferably by a computer, and women may, in decently limited numbers, join in the great descriptive exercise of totting up the sum of human experience and activity and running it through computers.

The trouble is, none of this tells us women much about ourselves. Over and over again, we can describe and quantify the effects, institutions and excesses of male supremacy. We cannot say why it exists, and, more importantly, we have made little progress in changing it. It is not enough to shrug off the why question as irrelevant. I want to argue that we never will liberate ourselves as women until we develop a systematic theoretical analysis of the roots and grounds and development of male history and male philosophy. For theory is not entirely abstract; it is not the absurdity of attempting to give phoney substance to a nothing excised from a nothing. Nor is it only poetic vision. Theory at its best is fundamentally a mode of analysing human experience which is at the same time a method of organizing that experience. Yet this has clearly been *male* experience. So we must ask: What is it about male experience which has engaged the masculine mind in the business of theorizing? Why have women not done so, and why should we get into this esoteric business in any case? If the answer

to these questions lies in prehistory, we do not shrug and give up the question. We investigate the evidence we have, imperfect though it may be. I hope to demonstrate that there is important evidence to be found, for example, in the work of the philosophical interpreters of the Greek polis.

This procedure needs to be defended only because of the climate created by vulgar scientism and capitalism's resistance to the revolutionary implications of dialectical analysis. It was Lenin who converted Karl Marx's important notion of praxis into a slogan – no practice without theory. Neither Lenin nor Marx was the first to understand that social change can only be brought about by unifying knowing and doing, thinking and acting, the unity which the word 'praxis' attempts to catch and hold. Plato and Aristotle and the whole line of political thinkers have understood the relation of praxis and social change in varying degrees and in brilliantly diverse ways. One thing, however, which is a constant in all this huge body of intellectual effort, is of prime interest to us here. Social thought, social action and political change are the prerogatives of the male of the species. Politics is a man's world.

In fact, the need to develop a theoretical basis for a feminism which can transform the world is an increasingly recognized need in the women's movement. The difficulty is knowing where to start. We cannot philosophize out of thin air, without becoming the merely normative speculators which theorists are so often accused of being. Somehow, the tradition of intellectual activity which history lays on us must be dealt with. It must also be transcended, a transcendence for which a feminine standpoint is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. One way of starting is, of course, an examination of the way men have gone about the business of unifying their historical activities with the actions which have, in a concrete sense, 'made history'. Feminist praxis has as its aim the making of a future, which is the making of a history. The way in which men have done this would be of little interest if it were disconnected, bizarre, contingent and quite irrational. It is none of these things. At its best, it has unified the thinker with the problems of his times, and the fact that his interpretation of these problems may be prejudiced by ideological presuppositions does not mean that they are therefore to be dismissed. Theorists, like all of us, come from somewhere, and where they come from is a significant factor in their

theorizing, even where the theory claims to be metaphysical or universal, either above and beyond the mundane realities of lived lives, or common to all lives. The shortcut way to say this is to say that theory is culturally determined. Neat though this is, it begs the larger questions of what culture is, and how the relations between person and culture work. Traditional theory may not have provided satisfactory answers to these questions, but it did not sweep them under the rug, either. The relation of the individual to cultures and to collectivities has always been a central concern of political theory. It is now a central concern of women, but women find this problem even more complex, because the culture which must provide us with the experiences, the questions and the theories and methods which we use as tools of understanding is a male dominant culture. What women need to do, to put it in the simplest way, is to be able to demonstrate that male dominant culture and the male-stream thought which buttresses and justifies it are both, in some sense, prejudiced by the very fact that they are masculine.

One way of doing this, or at least of starting to do it, is to consider male philosophy as an ideology of male supremacy. This is not simply pejorative. I use ideology as a concept, a tool for comprehending certain aspects of theorizing as an activity. One aspect is clearly the specific historical and social situation of the theorists. Perhaps more important than this, however, is the aspect concerning the nature of thought itself. The difficult question of whether thoughts are 'real' is an old one. What is at stake, and what is so confusing, is the difficulty of being certain as to how thought about anything is related to what is being thought about. The most complex case is maybe that of thought which thinks about thought, which was Socrates' notion of what philosophy was about. On a more concrete level, we have to recognize that thought, however imaginative and speculative, is somehow related to what is thought about, but also in some sense separated from what is thought about. It is this separation which is the key to understanding what is meant here by ideological thought. Thought need not represent what is thought about in a totally accurate reflection. The mind is not a make-up mirror. As in all reflections, physical as well as mental, there exists the possibility of distortion as well as the possibility of new and creative perception. The ideological aspect of thought is that aspect in which distortion can occur. It should be stressed that this need not be a wilful or deliberate distortion. In the process of separating itself from what is thought about,

thought frees itself, as it were, from the fetters of brute fact. This process may enhance the objects of thought, bringing out the shades and nuances of the less obvious properties of such objects. In this sense, it can be a constructive and creative activity. Yet the separation is illusory, in that the thinker cannot separate herself from her lived situation, and reality disturbs the purity of the relation of mind to the object of thought. Again, this may be a process which is not wholly conscious or deliberate. We can say that ideological thought is the presentation of error in a sincere and convincing way, an error which emerges from the particular position in time and space of the thinker and of the structure of thought itself. The presentation is sincere and convincing because it is 'real': that is to say, the distortions are not dreamt up, but emerge from the situation and intention of the theorist, situations shared by those who have received this work most sympathetically. The distortions represent something real in the place where the thinker is coming from. Rousseau, to take a well known example, visualizes the polity in terms of the city-state of Geneva, where he was born, and thus proclaims as general realities certain limited assumptions about political process which cannot be realistically extended from Geneva to France.

When I say, then, that male-stream thought is ideological thought, what I am saying is that it misrepresents one level of reality in the need to give expression to another level of reality. Whatever men are looking at, and whatever else they may be, they are male. The taken-for-granted reality, which we are interested in here because we must examine it critically, is the perceived reality of being male. If we know how the process of ideological thought has worked with men's efforts to give expression to masculine experience, we are in a better position to subject male-stream thought to a critical analysis: What exactly is it about masculine experience that colours conceptions of reality? We are also in a better position to understand how we might go about developing feminist theory, and to explore the reality of being female. It is the first of these considerations which have led me to write this book, and it is the second which I hope to be able to carry forward into some clearer notion of what a feminist theory would be like.

These considerations grow out of where I come from, and what I have been talking about so far is my experience as a student of political theory. The female student of this tradition has to come to terms with

the fact that this huge and impressive human achievement mixes its wisdom with male-supremacist assumption, that it takes for granted certain propositions about the relationship of men and women, and that it does this consistently. Political theory justifies male supremacy: the problem is to winkle out those aspects which may be called ideological in the sense which I have described, and to enquire into those realities of masculine experience which have been represented in a way which not only distorts and reinterprets reality, but which, on occasion, turns reality completely upside down.

However, the study of political theory is not the only experience which has convinced me of the need for strenuous theoretical efforts on the part of feminists. A second important factor is the experience within the women's movement. In the west, the excitements and enthusiasms of the earlier days of the movement are settling down into more sombre appraisals, or heating up into factional and disruptive argumentation. Recent economic dislocation has exposed the fragility of women's hard-won gains, and it has seemed to some serious observers that International Women's Year (1975) might have marked the end of yet another public outcry around 'the woman question', now ready to creep back into its million kitchens grey. This, I believe, is far too pessimistic a view. What I want to argue is that the movement is alive and well, but a little uncertain and indeterminate as to the direction now to be travelled and the strategies to be employed. I want further to argue that one important reason for this hiatus is our failure to develop a theoretical component for a feminist praxis, a unity of our thinking about what we must do with our methods of doing it. At the same time, I want to transcend the limitations of Marxist preoccupation with class struggle as the only operative field of praxis. Not, of course, that I deny the reality of class struggle, but it is quite clear that Marxist notions, or pseudo-Marxist notions, have proved divisive in the feminist movement. The battle as to whether sex struggle is a part of or separate from class struggle is a continuing motif of feminist deliberation. It is easy to answer that it is both, but more difficult to demonstrate how and why it can be part of but separate from the historical movement of class struggle. What I try to do in this book is provide a theoretical framework in which this kind of assertion can be made in a cogent way.

The other great source of factionalism in the women's movement relates to the vexed question of sexuality, and the opposition of

oppressive heterosexuality to an idyllic dream of Lesbian women excising personal power relations from a swinish world. I believe that the confusion of sexual freedom with freedom in general has not only damaged the solidarity of women, but is based on an inadequate conceptualization of the nature of sexuality. Having said this, I can no longer withhold the information that this book is really about motherhood: despised, derided and neglected motherhood. To the question: Where does feminist theory start? I answer: Within the process of human reproduction. Of that process, sexuality is but a part. I intend to argue that it is not within sexual relations but within *the total process of human reproduction* that the ideology of male supremacy finds its roots and its rationales. More controversially, I argue that it is from an adequate understanding of the process of reproduction, nature's traditional and bitter trap for the suppression of women, that women can begin to understand their possibilities and their freedom.

This argument, too, derives from my own experience, but not, paradoxically, from the experience of motherhood, for I have no children. It is not, perhaps, common or even thought to be proper to inject these kind of subjective considerations into treatises on political theory, but women must begin making their own rules of rational discourse, and I happen to think this is important. Long before I decided to become a student of political philosophy at the advanced age of forty-one, I had spent my working life in hospital nursing, and a great deal of my personal life in grassroots political activity. Both of these experiences contributed to my decision to study political theory. Let me speak first of political practice, which is perhaps not quite so significant in the present context as my experience as a practising midwife.

I spent my childhood in Glasgow, Scotland, during the severe economic depression of the 1930s. This is clearly not enough to make one a socialist, for the phenomenon of the working-class Tory is a persistent feature of British politics. However, I came across the Fabian Society and its works at quite an early age, and was an uncritical fan of Beatrice Webb. This is a bit ironic, given Webb's impatience with the woman's movement and outright contempt for the suffragettes who were her contemporaries. However, democratic socialism was, for me, an attractive political position, and I joined the Labour Party in my teens and worked very hard for its fortunes in the decade immediately

following the Second World War. Like many of my generation of starry-eyed idealists, I was shattered by the events of 1956, the year of Suez and the Soviet invasion of Hungary. It seemed to many of us that the promise of a rational and equitable society brought about by commitment and the hard work of ordinary people had collapsed in a real maelstrom, generated by the evidently essential violence embedded in the exercise of political power. The major political systems of the world had seen themselves threatened, and responded in the only way which they seemed to understand: the exercise of military might. Britain, France and the USSR stood in the nakedness of their imperialist skins on the banks of the Nile and the Danube, while Americans leapt to protect their capitalist investments in a sickening show of phoney 'democratic' concern. Suez and Hungary were devastating to humanist illusion, and these plagues on both houses took me out of the political process for years. None the less, I could hardly help being aware of my own naiveté, and the fact that I really had only the haziest of notions as to why these things happened. When feminism rekindled my interest in politics, it was a very cynical interest which I brought to yet another notion of liberation. I was acutely aware of the fact that this cause, too, might be brittle and ephemeral unless one was able to bring to the struggle some systematic knowledge, not only of the practical content of these aspirations, but of the form of political process. In other words, I needed theoretical understanding. As I have already indicated, I could not find it in the theoretical tradition, but I did find that this tradition was an obscurely promising place to start.

The fact that I was a practising midwife in the industrial maze of Clydeside society was much more significant, for this experience was the root of a profound scepticism which I have brought to bear on the radical polemics of such liberationists as Shulamith Firestone, who believes childbirth to be barbaric, or of such female male-supremacists as Hannah Arendt, who perceives childbirth as animal. To be sure, childbirth is hard and often painful labour, a strenuous task peculiarly unsuited to being performed under a halo, but, equally clearly, it is a social and cultural affair. It is true that the conditions surrounding childbirth may indeed be barbaric. On Clydeside in the 1950s it was not at all uncommon to find poor housing, overcrowding, husbands weakened by industrial disease or drunkeness, and mothers whose own infancy in the Great Depression, with its legacy of malnutrition, had left

them with a bone structure very different to that designed by nature to facilitate the passage of the newborn child. Despite such conditions, childbirth was not privative. It was something of a celebration among neighbour women and the two grandmothers, priestesses of custom who dispensed superstition, wisdom, strong tea and sisterhood with impressive impartiality. Childbirth was essentially a social, indeed a public affair, a celebration and a rite. This socialibility has largely been lost, and was perhaps never as strong in North America as it was in Europe.

Midwifery as an art is disappearing, though many feminists see a need to revive it, a view which I share. Childbirth in the circumstances under which I practised midwifery was still a celebration of femininity. One of the current problems of the affirmation of sisterhood is precisely a lack of the social ceremonies and unifying public occasions which the brotherhood of man has always valued. One can watch strong men cry as the national anthem is played at the beginning of a sporting occasion, and the unifying myths of militarism have survived even the cauldron of Vietnam. Lesser cultic activities thrive in masonic brotherhoods, trade unions and various occupational and interest clubs. For women, there are few social structures of this nature, and it is simply not enough to meet in earnest groups. We have to celebrate our femininity, and that is exactly what these proletarian women in the dingy streets of industrial Glasgow were doing. The midwife was a privileged participant in a quintessentially social celebration of the strength of being female. Its basis was the maligned function of reproduction.

Now, of course, childbirth has become a responsibility of the 'health industry', a hospital occasion presided over by obstetrical entrepreneurs, usually male, in conditions of depersonalized asepsis which transforms woman, in every sense the agent, into a patient. Medical developments have no doubt reduced the life-risking dangers of parturition, but they have done so at the price of concealing and reducing the unifying female sociability attendant on the birth of a new life. One can exaggerate this effect, but there is a sense in which reproduction has become commodity production, just as the social relations of reproduction have become property relations. This raises again the question of class analysis, for clearly these developments are related significantly to general effects common to social forms in capitalist society and to aspects of bourgeois culture and ideology. The desocialization of childbirth is part of a general trend towards the

isolation of individuals and the efficient 'rationalizing' of human events, which are part of the prevailing notion of society as a giant marketplace. The question is: Is this *all* that it is? The answer clearly is no. We must not romanticize earlier and simpler forms of childbirth. The sociability in question clearly could not challenge the reality of a dominant male-supremacist culture, and the anthropological identifications of rites of parturition in non-capitalist societies by no means indicates that the condition of women vis-à-vis men in such societies is necessarily different or somehow better. What this means, of course, is that male supremacy is a phenomenon which, in capitalist societies, takes particular and identifiable forms. I intend to argue that, while the cultural forms of the social relations of reproduction do indeed vary in ways which are discernibly related to the economic realm, class analysis cannot wholly comprehend the genesis and actuality of male dominance. I can argue in this way because my early experience as a midwife to the working class has given me an alternative perception of reproduction.

The sensibilities of a woman and a midwife make the study of political theory an adventurous affair. One tends to read the bits which are usually regarded as of less interest than the major body of the work of any theorists, for the truth is that most of the big names in the tradition have been far more interested in reproductive realities than are those exegetes who have set themselves up to explain the tradition to those who like their theory predigested, if at all. In this book we shall be much concerned with extracted notions of selected theorists, and our interest will be a critical one. The family appears in political theory, as it does in history, in a number of ways: it has been perceived as the 'basic unit' of political society, as the economic unity of society, as the repository of tradition, custom and morality, as a mode of safely siphoning off the disorderly dangers of sexual passion. It has also been perceived as the most practical mode of rearing children and replacing those lost in battle, or of replacing the labour power of the industrial proletariat. This wide variety of views of the family, together with the marvellous variation in family forms which have appeared in history, all have two properties in common. One is the conviction that the family is necessary. The second is that the family is the proper sphere of women. Only in the contemporary industrialized world have these propositions begun to be challenged.

This preoccupation with family is reflected by political theorists: there are clearly relationships between actual political forms, political theory and the social relations of reproduction. It is this relationship which is to be analysed. In subsequent chapters, I hope to develop a theory and a method of analysis and a conceptual vocabulary by which social and political theory can be subjected to feminist critique. This will be a constructive critique, in that out of it may grow not only some understanding of the origins and development of the fact and ideology of male supremacy, but also the rudiments of a feminist theory which will have some descriptive and strategic value. It is not to be argued that the defence of male supremacy is really all that political theory is: it is argued that whatever else it is, political theory has also been a standard bearer for a specifically political ideology of male supremacy. This is the particular aspect of political theory which is to be examined, and the effect is a pronounced onesidedness, which will no doubt offend students of the discipline. No apology, however, is offered for the onesidedness: it might be called a corrective bias. The conventional concerns of political philosophy are well able to look to their own laurels, and there is a huge tradition of primary and secondary sources in which the handful of visionaries and geniuses march with a great army of special pleaders and intellectual journeymen. Those who want to study, for example, Plato's theory of forms or Locke's notion of individual property ownership can find plenty of material. Those who want to know how philosophical opinion reflected on the simple biological facts of masculinity will find no handy text. These are the enquiries which are addressed here. Feminist theory has to be biased because it is anti-bias. We have to correct a profound and long-sustained imbalance, and this cannot be done without jumping rather brutally and without invitation on the end of the philosophical seesaw which has lingered too long in the rarefied heights of the complacent taken-for-grantedness of male conceptions of the nature of man. Perhaps more important than these considerations, however, is the presupposition which informs the whole exercise: it is posited that there is such a thing as a 'feminist perspective'. It is also assumed that this perspective must carve out its own subject matter, and in so doing can provide new and illuminating reappraisals of the more encrusted tenets of male-stream thought. Meantime, we may quite cheerfully borrow from that tradition any contributions in terms of theory and

methodology which are needed for the development of feminist theory. In this way, we avoid slavish and ultimately inappropriate devotion to any particular set of theoretical beliefs. We do not say that the tradition must be rejected in a wholesale way. Indeed, we argue that most of it is part of a heritage of human achievement of which the race can quite properly be proud. What we do, therefore, is work in a dialectical way. We seek to uncover contradictions in traditional thought: to root these contradictions in the realities of male experience; to point out that they have been valid in specific historical circumstances; to say why they are no longer valid; to conserve what is valuable and to transcend what is not; to create something new which is none the less continuous with history and creative of a future. If one wants a metaphor for this process, women do not have very far to look. We are labouring to give birth to a new philosophy of birth. This contribution to feminist theory will be like traditional theoretical activity in so far as it culls from that tradition the conceptual and analytical tools which can transform the tradition. It will be unlike the tradition in that the genderic perspective brought to bear is one which has historically been excluded from the tradition. The unifying thread in all this is human history, but human history perceived as a social process which has as an absolutely and inescapably necessary substructure the process of human reproduction.

The use of this word 'genderic' raises the question of an appropriate vocabulary. The word 'sex' is avoided simply because it has too many levels of meaning. Sex can be instinct, drive, an act in response to that drive, a gender, a role, an emotional bomb or a causal variable. For purposes of analytical clarity, I have confined the use of 'sex' and 'sexuality' to the description of copulatory activity. This is clearly unsatisfactory in that human sexuality is a great deal more than copulation. None the less, sexuality is perceived here as affecting but one moment in the biological process of reproduction, which, unlike the human participants, is quite indifferent to orgasmic and conjugal delights.

For the social relations between men and women and for the differentiation of male and female the word 'gender' is preferred. While a sustained attempt has been made to use this terminology consistently, it is in many instances cumbersome and contrary to ordinary usage, and the desire for consistency sometimes yields to the compulsions of custom.