
*The Politics of Reproduction* is a critique of traditional political social and psychological 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 spent her childhood in Glasgow, Scotland. She was politically active. She was a practising midwife in the industrial maze of Clydeside society before coming to Canada. She spent her working life in hospital nursing, and a great deal of her personal life in grassroots political activity, prior to becoming a student of political philosophy and an educator at the University of York then the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

She recalls childbirth in Scotland as an essentially social, indeed a public affair, a celebration and a rite. This sociability has largely been lost, and was perhaps never as strong in North America as it was in Europe.

O’Brien suggests that there have been two historical events of great importance to society. One is the discovery of paternity, the second is the discovery of contraception. She suggests that the impact of reproductive technology is a world historical event which must be given theoretical and political expression. Prior to the Age of Contraception, the most recent world historical change in the substructure of material necessities which determine the course of history took place in the productive rather than the reproductive mode. This was the development of capitalism. She is convincing in her demonstration of the parochialism of male political theory to date and the need to counteract it by including the female experience.

O’Brien offers a new model of historical process in preliminary form. She 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 reinterpretation of contemporary women’s experience. O’Brien’s work provides a conceptual framework for those interested in social, political and feminist theory that will transcend patriarchal intellectual traditions.

O’Brien provides an in-depth view of older and present-day societies and their social relationships — including Capitalist and Communist societies. She reviews women’s place in those societies (a lack of place). Such issues as day care, abortion, the rewards for domestic labour, family violence, the legal disadvantages of women: all of these issues emerge from the lived experience of women, but their coherence does not come from the fact that they are women’s issues. It comes from their social situation in the private realm, which is why they have often been defined as non-political.

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.

She suggests that the integration of women on equal terms into the productive process is a necessary but not sufficient condition of liberation. Liberation also depends
on the reintegration of men on equal terms into reproductive process. In a rational human society, people will be producers in the morning, child carers in the afternoon, and critics in the evening. Only then can men and women abandon a long preoccupation with sleeping together in favour of being awake together.

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