

The Irreverent Mary

Philosopher, Colleague, Friend

BY D.W. LIVINGSTONE

Mary O'Brien lived life to the fullest with little respect for the barriers posed by patriarchal institutions. She was no cloistered scholar but passionate about sharing her knowledge with as many other people as possible in a broad collective process she called "reproducing the world" (1989, 257).

Mary was deeply passionate about virtually everything, from her careers in nursing, midwifery, and the academy to her multiple avocations of gardening, games and poetry, as well as her many friends. She was as utterly irreverent about the institutional boundaries of patriarchal capitalist society in her personal life as in her published writings. From her earliest years, she never exhibited much deference for male authority figures or male-constructed institutional rules. She was forever breaking these boundaries, connecting the public and private, the sacred and profane in ways that reanimated both spheres.

One of my favorite stories about the young Mary illustrates well this incessant reconnecting of divided spheres of life. She was a nurse at a Glasgow hospital in a ward with many long-term care patients. To cheer them up, she started a daily betting service on the local horse races. She was a pretty good handicapper and some of the patients got some tidy winnings. Apparently the combination of winning numbers and nursing skills was also a pretty good recipe for quickened healing. But one day, distraught and in tears, the wife of one of the patients who was about to be discharged rushed up to Mary. The source of the tears? "We've never lived or eaten so well as since he's been in here with you. Can't you find some way to keep him in?" The young Mary let him out. The older Mary might not have done so as quickly!

The older, white-haired Mary my partner Angela and I knew as a friend was one of very few adults who didn't talk down to our kids; she treated their experiences as equally worthy of attention as the adults in any gathering. She is probably the only friend we have ever had who could talk with equal facility to Angela about the intricacies of gardening and to me about the composition of baseball pitching staffs. Our reciprocal garden visits with Mary and Cath McNaughton were a highlight of our summers. And the raspberry cuttings Mary gave us always flourished, just like most things she touched.

As a colleague in the Department of Sociology at OISE, Mary quickly became the heart of the department. She

virtually never missed a faculty caucus or departmental assembly meeting and never failed to enfuse even the most serious academic crises with a joke or two. Mary was a radical feminist scholar in the fullest sense and she drew many young women students to the department to study with her. But she never sought disciples for the powerful paradigm she did so much to create, always encouraging her students to find their own perspective and problematic. She also never forgot her experience as a mature part-time graduate student. She volunteered to be the department's liaison officer with all part-time students and built a much more welcoming home for them there. She had the deepest respect for the work of the secretarial staff and never failed to recognize their contributions to her scholarly works. She generously celebrated the pioneering efforts of the feminist students and faculty who created the feminist working environment that drew her there, as well as the genuine support among her male colleagues. Mary became the glue and the leavening agent.

In her memory, the department has decided to establish the Mary O'Brien Scholarship Fund. It will be given annually to the full or part-time student in women's studies who best exemplifies Mary's critical approach to social inquiry (see the inside back cover of this issue for details).

It is extremely difficult to assume a broad enough perspective to provide a balanced assessment of the intel-



lectual legacy of one's contemporaries. Especially in Mary's case, a deep sense of personal loss may further cloud our judgement. But I believe it is very likely that generations from now, when all the rich memories of Mary's life that we so cherish are gone with us, the achievement of *The Politics of Reproduction* will be much more deeply appreciated than it is now. Mary O'Brien conducted the first fundamental critique of malestream philosophical thought which revealed its basis in the suppression of the historical significance of the social relations of biological reproduction. She took on the big guns of Western political thought—from Plato to Hegel and Marx and on to Sartre—and demonstrated their systemic denial of women's experience. Secondly, Mary articulated a thorough conceptual framework for understanding the reproductive process. This includes the moments of menstruation, ovulation, copulation, alienation, conception, gestation, labour, birth, appropriation, and nurture, as well as the interactions between these moments and the contradictory social relations which constitute the reproductive process. Thirdly, she began to apply this radical feminist paradigm to investigate, specify, and illustrate the actual character of these specific processes, and to show how prior malestream and feminist thinkers alike had misconstrued them.

Mary herself was under no grandiose illusion about how much she had achieved in theoretical terms:

This preliminary, and still very crude, analysis of the dialectics of reproduction is intended to be suggestive and heuristic, and by no means definitive and complete.... Yet the shadow of a theory is beginning to emerge. (1981, 62–63)

She was deeply appreciative of her debts to Marx, assuming the standpoint of women as he had that of the proletariat, critically attacking the central assumptions of malestream philosophy as he had bourgeois political economy, and developing a dialectical, materialist, and historical analysis of biological reproduction that was directly inspired by his analysis of the social relations of the capitalist commodity production process (1981, 24). Of course, she also severely critiqued and far transcended

Marx in her comprehension of gender relations within capitalist patriarchy. But she clearly recognized—perhaps more so than any of her contemporaries—the extent to which the development of feminist reproduction theory and broader social challenges to patriarchal institutions were intimately linked with recent major changes in reproductive technologies and the reproductive process itself. The current Age of Contraception is probably of comparable epochal significance for gender relations to the rise of industrial manufacturing in the 1840s and '50s for class relations. That was when Marx began his analyses of capitalism and class exploitation. Future intellectual historians will likely come to regard Mary O'Brien's *Politics of Reproduction* as comparable to Marx's *Grundrisse*, the preliminary critical studies of political economy that he shortly afterward distilled into *Capital*. Future generations may well regard Mary O'Brien's premature departure from the academy and the aborting of her further work on this major

feminist project as seriously as those who knew her now mourn her personal passing. She will be profoundly missed not only by those who knew her, but by the many more who will come to know her and collectively reproduce and extend her transcending vision.

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