

**STATE POWER:  
MATERIALISM AND POLITICS**



*Mary O'Brien, 1980. Photo: Pamela Harris*

# Mary O'Brien's Contributions to

BY NANCY HARTSOCK



Mary O'Brien with Angela Miles (top photograph) and Somer Brodribb (lower photograph)

Mary O'Brien's passing from the scene of feminist theory has represented an important loss, especially for those of us trying to make use of Marxist male-stream dialectical theories. It was very interesting to reread *The Politics of Reproduction* with the benefit of 18 more years of feminist theory. The issues feminist theory as a whole has been concerned with

have changed with more recent theorizing about the importance of differences among women, and with the impact of post-modernist and post-structuralist work. It is also true that the relationship of feminist theory to Marxist theory has been attenuated since O'Brien wrote (and indeed since I wrote my essay on feminist standpoint theory at about the same time). It has certainly been said that such theories are archaic and mired with pitfalls that can undermine our present concerns.

But O'Brien's work can still make significant contributions to contemporary debates. Her contributions lie in three major areas: These are 1) her reworking of Marxist dialectics in light of the contributions of Hegel and Freud but with specifically feminist goals in mind; 2) her work on the nature/culture divide and her still very persuasive argument that this fictitious division owes its power to its connection with male reproductive experience;<sup>1</sup> 3) the connections she draws between knowledge and

power, and the contention that there are better and worse understandings of the world and that these understandings are connected to material and historical existence. Under the heading of both two and three she puts forwards an account of gendered subjectivity that should be taken account of by feminist theorists who are today concerned with

issues of constituting feminist subjectivities. It must be said that her work bears the marks of its own birth, meaning that it came out of a different period with different questions at issue. In her work, there is usually only talk of women and men, (or even more foreign to U.S. feminist academics, male and female) whereas now we emphasize more of the differences among women. The effects of globalization and neoliberalism are, today, complicating feminist analyses which are less ambitious but no less important than the sweeping account of reproductive consciousness O'Brien produces.

## Dialectics as methodological resource

O'Brien concentrates on Marx's dialectics in detail, not to reproduce his ideas but rather to "transcend and revise his own theoretical model" (O'Brien 1981, 24). She is clear that her use of Marx, Hegel, and Freud is neither to claim their authority, nor to apologize for their methods. Rather she is engaged in a feminist analysis with feminist questions which they had ignored. While O'Brien is attempting to transform the subject matter of dialectical thinking (as a project I have never been as explicit about) she is also reworking its subject matter. She argues that "we cannot analyze reproduction from the standpoint of any existing theory" since these "theories themselves are products of male-stream thought" (1981, 23).

I too have a number of problems with Marx's own theories, among them 1) class understood centrally as

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a relation among men is the only division that counts; 2) the analysis is fundamentally masculinist in that workers' wives and their labour are presumed; 3) homosocial birth images mark the analysis in important ways; 4) women come and go in the analysis and are profoundly absent from his account of the extraction of surplus value—the heart of his analysis; and 5) he is clearly a nineteenth-century Eurocentric writer who can pay little attention to such contemporary concerns as environmental issues and the rise of service industries.

But given these serious objections why should I raise once again, in the context of an appreciation of O'Brien's work, the importance of a nineteenth-century European patriarch (or in her case patriarchs) for late twentieth-century feminist theory? Why Marx? Why now? The fall of the Soviet state and the Berlin Wall have occasioned a global celebration of the market, and of capitalism's successes. Fredric Jameson notes that for those who do not distinguish clearly between "Marxism itself as a mode of thought and analysis, socialism as a political and societal aim and vision, and Communism as a historical movement" Marxism can appear to be an embarrassing remnant of the past (Jameson 14). And certainly Teresa Ebert is right when she suggests that "Under the pressure of the dominant discourses of Postmodernism, Marxism and historical materialism are becoming lost revolutionary knowledges for the current generation of feminists" (Ebert x). Still, even figures such as Derrida argue, regarding *The Com-*



Mary O'Brien and Frieda Forman

*munist Manifesto*, "I know of few texts in the philosophical tradition, perhaps none, whose lesson seemed more urgent today" (Derrida qtd. in Ebert x). I would add that in the context of a capitalism which has become truly global, and in within which ever more of life is commodified, much of Marx's critique of capitalism remains very apt.<sup>2</sup>

I see Marx as an anti-Enlightenment figure on balance although it must be recognized that his relationship to the Enlightenment and the whole tradition of western political thought is that of both the inheriting son and the rebellious son.<sup>3</sup> Thus, his account of the process of labour itself can be seen in sexual/gendered terms: Marx theorizes the relation of the worker to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him: "activity as suffering, strength as weakness, *begetting as emasculating*, ... self estrangement" (Tucker 76 [emphasis mine]). Marx's account of es-

tranged labour thus uses some of the "second homosocial birth" images I have found, as has O'Brien in canonical works in the history of western political thought. The point of this second birth is to overcome the defects of the first birth—a body born from women—and to replace it with a more durable and intellectual/spiritual one.<sup>4</sup> Thus, for Marx, the worker creates both himself and the world, and herein lies both the core of the problem and the potential solution. Feminist theory too exists in an ambivalent relation to the Enlightenment and the categories of knowledge generated during this period. On the one hand, feminist theorists sometimes argue for a "me too" position to work for women's inclusion in a number of societal institutions (see Ferguson). On the other hand, women as women have never been the "subject" of Enlightenment/Liberal theory, so women's insistence on speaking at all troubles

those theories (see, for example, Eisenstein). (It is certainly my suspicion that this, along with de-colonization, and struggles for recognition by racial and ethnic groups, is one reason why European and North American theorists have lost hold of some of their certainties.)

My own reading of Marx is one that some have suggested is itself postmodern. I, however, have much

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in common with O'Brien's reading/transformation of dialectical thinking. I myself am greatly indebted to Bertell Ollman's (1971) ideas about Marxist dialectics as based on an account of internal relations. I also share David Harvey's very similar understanding of dialectics. Thus, I take from Marx the idea that one must replace the idea that world is composed of "things" with that of the importance of "processes." In addition, Marx's dialectical method holds that things do not "exist outside of or prior to the processes, flows, and relations that create, sustain, or undermine them (Harvey 49).<sup>5</sup> And going back to Marx, in the *1844 Manuscripts* and the beginning of *Capital*, he is very concerned to stress that "man" is part of the natural world, and that "nature" can only be understood as a part of human existence and production.

O'Brien's reading does not simply suggest how Marxist theory could be

of use to feminist theory. She situates dialectics within Marxist theory (as well as Hegel's version). She also translates his stress on the importance of technology in general to her own concerns about the importance of the technological progress which led to contraception. Thus, she includes and works off of his own sense that technology has important effects on social relations—both in limiting and expanding possibilities (O'Brien 1981, 23). In addition, she is clearer than I ever was about the proper use of the "fathers"—not as paradigm but rather as tools for understanding the male perspective on reproduction, and its consequent stress on the importance of death rather than birth.<sup>6</sup>

Her concern with transcending the theories she was working with once again sets her apart from me. I wanted to use those traditions for feminist ends, but was not as clear as she about the importance of using them to transcend the categories. She was involved not only in an effort to learn from the father but to transcend, and rewrite the core of dialectics. By applying dialectics to the process of reproduction, she is able to argue that reproductive processes, traditionally held to be biological—by both masculinist and feminist thinkers—is dialectical, material, and historical. Thus, she translates Marx's and Hegel's ideas about alienation into alienation from the point of view of reproduction. Thus, women's alienation from their seed is mediated in labour (O'Brien 1981, 32).

Moreover, she presented an account of how human consciousness is inseparable from the experience of human reproduction. Whereas almost no one (Marx included) has addressed the question of exactly how "experience" (itself not very separable from consciousness as consciousness interprets experience) takes form as consciousness, O'Brien uses the issue of birth to argue that the male attitude toward birth is "neither natural, accidental, nor conspiratorial." But the attitude and the interpreta-

tion are rooted in male experience.

O'Brien is clear that a dialectical analysis is not without preconditions: One must accept the claim that the process of reproduction changes historically, and one must also accept the claim that the experienced process and human consciousness are inseparable, although the links are complex and difficult to trace.<sup>7</sup> Still, thinking about reproduction as a dialectical (and historical and materialist) process marks an important step forward in feminist theory. It should also serve as advice to contemporary theorists to rethink what is taken to be the "natural" rather than dismissing it as something of concern to feminist theory. The idea that what had been previously categorized as "nature" and therefore nonsocial should rather be thought as historical, material, and understood in dialectical terms provides an important resource for feminist theory in the late '90s. As I argue below, dialectical thinking, with its focus on processes and history, when linked with O'Brien's focus on reproduction as such a process, can alert us to new problems and new ways of thinking about old problems—processes not necessarily related to reproduction but to other understandings we continue to accept about how to understand the world we live in.

#### **The relation between culture and nature**

I am sure that it will seem odd from the perspective of contemporary feminist theory for me to value the links between and mutual interaction between nature and culture. This has somehow ceased to be an issue for feminist theorists who are paying attention mostly to the creation of consciousness and bodies themselves, with the weight given not to the bodies, but rather to the role of consciousness in structuring/creating bodies.<sup>8</sup> One of the central points to be taken from O'Brien's work is an understanding of the ways that this fundamentally social struc-

turing of bodies takes place—in terms of her theory through a better understanding of the processes of reproduction. This question has been one of the most vexed in feminist theory. It was a great step forward, and a struggle, to change the discussion from the “natural sexual nature of women” to concerns about gender as a socially constructed series of relations and processes. But that discussion, partly for important tactical reasons, assumed “nature” was opposed to the social. Nature was a category used to define and disempower women for thousands of years in the “Western World.”

Making a case for women’s full participation in societies requires the dismantling of the links between Woman and Nature. These links have not been dismantled, but rather feminist theory has turned away from them in a concentration on the cultural and social. In my argument for a feminist standpoint (not the standpoint of women, an important distinction) one feature of my argument that has been almost always misconstrued is my insistence that women are more involved in exchanges with nature than men because of the sexual division of labour. I have been read as a biological determinist, and this is even more true of Mary O’Brien. In my case, I was trying to take account of Donna Haraway’s insistence that nature was not separate from human intervention, and that the science we have is not bad science but science which reflect/express our social relations (see Haraway 1987, 1991). But O’Brien’s account of the process of reproduction provides a far clearer account of the relation of nature and culture than I was able to. Man is separated from both nature, and continuous time, while women’s experience requires a consciousness of both (O’Brien 1981, 34). She differentiates the moments of reproductive process to demonstrate that some are involuntary, and even unexperienced—ovulation and conception. Others are voluntary—nurture. And others share features of both—

e.g. copulation (O’Brien 1981, 47–48). Still, the critique of accounts of nature and society inherited from thousands of years of masculinist thinkers remain an important and by and large unaddressed topic for feminist theory.

O’Brien takes this as an important topic, and focuses dialectically on the importance of reversals and the construction of phantasms and magic theories to support men’s power. Here she is obviously drawing on Marx’s claim that “everything is reversed in competition.” Thus historically, men have imagined that blood and death can help them to overcome their fate by means of a second birth. This image is pervasive in the history of western political thought and appears in Marx’s own work in terms of man “begetting” himself. It has, as O’Brien points out been theorized as a second nature. But O’Brien juxtaposes this to a focus on flesh and life—a common sense focus rather than a phantasmic rewriting of the human condition to more closely resemble men’s experience. She argues instead that women are about to begin to elaborate their own second nature (1981, 194). And in the process must establish the values which are to be strengthened. More precisely, the use of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic is, she argues a “very elaborate second birth ... in which the fear of death, an emotion, is the true parent of biological and conscious life” (O’Brien 1981, 169).

Marx and Hegel may have begun the project O’Brien takes on, but she is critical of their responses to the problem of differentiating human society from “nature” and “man” from animals. She criticizes Marx for being inconsistent on the subject of nature and others for positing the need for an existence of a second nature (O’Brien 1981, 61–62). She argues instead that the “history of social relations of reproduction has been the history of male attempts to impose order on contingency ...” (O’Brien 1981, 192). She takes the position that Marx put forward a

philosophy that depended on eating while she puts forward a position which recognizes that “both digestive processes and reproductive processes are dialectical structures ... [because there] are moments of separation, unification, and transformation” (44). Thus, contrary to common understanding, biology is not “brute” but rather represents the separation of men from nature through their alienation from reproduction that has led them to posit a second nature—one that men make for themselves and which establishes the world of politics as the world governed by second nature. The value of reproductive labour is synthetic—unity of sentient beings with natural processes (O’Brien 1981, 44, 60).

### **Knowledge, power, and subjectivity**

Both O’Brien’s work and my own, as well as those theorists we have used as resources have attempted to understand the relation between knowledge and power. Since she and I wrote, more nuanced accounts of these relations have been put forward, but the outlines of O’Brien’s case, especially given the time during which she developed it remain powerful.<sup>9</sup> She is discussing the development of gendered subjectivities based on experiences with reproduction.

Second nature is not only both

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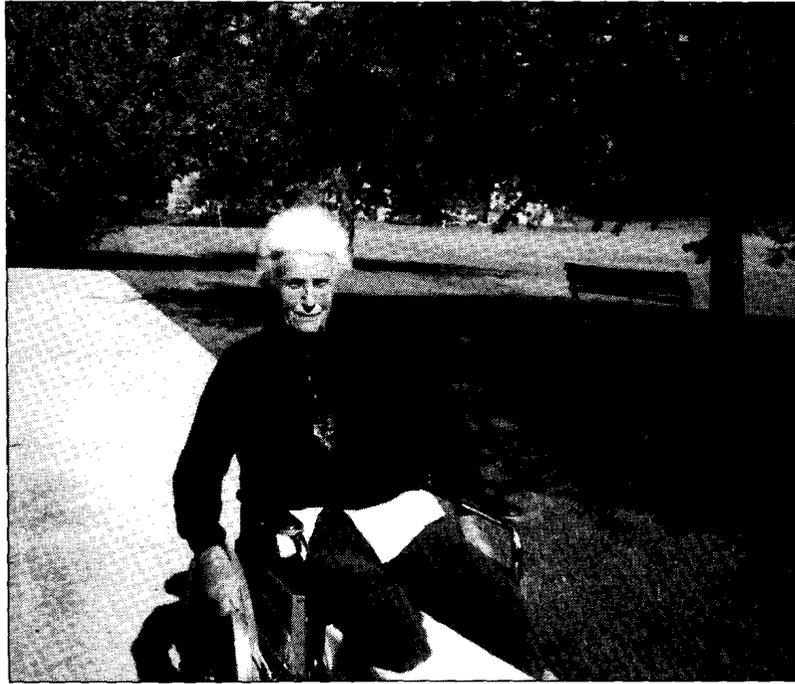
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male and female in her terms and is not only the things we do by habit, but also the construction of the world of politics and the polis as the culmination of this effort (O'Brien 1981, 118, 123). She locates an important shift in the move from kinship relations to the polis and the development of citizenship for men only (and only some men). And her argument throughout the book is that the masculine understanding of social relations is connected to death, concerned with second birth, and alienated from an understanding reproduction. Thus, the understand available to women has several advantages—the experience of continuous

time, a sense of the relation to nature and the ways this is also a social relation, among others. Her argument for a superior understanding which has not had power is more nuanced than my own in my feminist standpoint essay, but the impulse and conclusion are similar.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to read her work for the methodology it embraces rather than for the specific categories she puts forward. More recently, in terms of the discussion of the importance of the experience of being marginalized, one can translate O'Brien's account to read women for the marginalized but to recognize that the marginalized include groups other than women. Finally, the experience of being marginalized (rather than simply choosing to take up a position on the margins) can provide important resources as well as motivations for change. The process of marginalization can help to create agencies for historical change. I do not want to suggest that those who inhabit the margins are more moral,

or "better people." The experience of domination and marginalization leaves many scars. Still I do want to suggest that these experiences may open the possibility of developing important new understandings of social relations and especially poli-



tics. But to understand this requires several things: first, a discussion of the nature of the margins; second, a discussion of the constitution of marked subjectivities; third, a recognition of the ways marginality contribute to an existence in and potential understanding of multiple realities; and fourth a rewriting of historical agency in light of an understanding of collective, socially constructed subjects. I have only a little space to lay this out and my own thinking on some of these issues is still at early stages. But in some ways O'Brien's work can serve as a precursor and guide to these concerns.

First, many discussions of marginality fail to recognize that power is central to constituting the marginalized and oppressed. The margins are distanced from the centre, but there are important effects of power: the view from the margins is at the same time the view from below. O'Brien reminds us that women's perspectives are different from men's because of the lives each group lives.

She leaves it implicit that those who are dominated live in a world structured by others for their own purposes—purposes which at the very least are not our own, and which are in various degrees inimical to our development and even existence.

Thus, discussions of the construction of marginality must face the issue of who has the power to determine what is at the margin, and what is to be the centre. In O'Brien's terms, the view from below is substituted for by the view from the perspective of reproduction. In her terms the mystery to be investigated is how men developed the power to make their fantasies work.

Related to the construction of margins is the construction of the subjectivities who inhabit these margins, subjects who are now characterized as "marked" or deviant from the norm defined by the centre. I have never found a better account of this process than that of Albert Memmi in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. It is the colonizer who constructs the image of the colonized, and then imposes this image in every institution and in every human contact. The colonized are pushed toward becoming objects. "As an end, in the colonizer's supreme ambition, [the Other] should exist only as a function of the needs of the colonizer ..." (Memmi 86). Thus, marked subjectivities must be understood as subjected. Part of their subjection is that they are not seen as fellow individual members of a human community, but rather as part of a chaotic, disorganized, and anonymous collectivity. As Memmi puts it, they carry "the mark of the plural" (85). But I have argued along with O'Brien, that this imposed collectivity contains, from another per-

spective, important possibilities for change. The experience of living on the margins can be the basis for counterhegemonic discourses, but the construction of these discourses is a difficult project.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez's Nobel Prize address presents a rich statement of the difficulties. "Our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable. This my friends, is the crux of our solitude.... The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary ..." (qtd. in Galeano 262).<sup>11</sup> The result is that the dominated and marginalized are forced to recognize (unlike whites, and males, and Euro-Americans) that they inhabit multiple worlds. W.E.B. DuBois has described this situation from an African American perspective: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (qtd. in Ladner 273-274). Gloria Anzaldúa, writing out of the experience of a Chicana living on the Mexico-Texas border describes a similar phenomenon. She points not only to the experience of living in several realities and thus being forced to exist in the interface but also to "la facultad," the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meanings of deeper realities, to see the "deep structures below the surface."

These examples illustrate the ways marginalization can contribute to an understanding of multiple realities. It is these experiences and the skills that develop in response to them that can lead to new possibilities and new analyses. But this understanding is not only available to those themselves located on the margins: the analysis is available to anyone. This can lead to a rewriting of historical agency on the basis of the construction of new, oppositional, and collective subjectivities. The development of these collective subjectivities

is central to developing oppositional practices and analyses.

At the same time, the development of other perspectives cannot provide real alternatives except through the development of an understanding of power relations. The discourse can expose problems which are not visible from the perspective of the dominant—or in O'Brien's terms, male experience. Her work suggests that we can use specific frameworks which begin but do not end with questions of gender. Thus, O'Brien has not provided a model with which to understand marginalization, but her work needs to be set in dialogue with accounts of others "from below." The accounts of the disempowered, learning to look at their own experiences from perspectives other than the dominant group, can allow us to see the falseness of hegemonic accounts of society. These accounts—in her case just from the perspective of gender—can provide different and more liberatory accounts of the world, accounts which can encompass and explain the views of dominant groups as well.

### Conclusion

O'Brien's work bears the marks of its time and place of origin. But several of the points she makes can still provide guidance to feminist theorists. It is important to remember the resources that dialectical analyses can bring to feminist theory: the importance of understanding what are thought to be things as part of ongoing, historical, and interactive processes. Second, there is her reworking of the nature/culture divide to demonstrate that it is fundamentally a fiction developed from men's experience of reproduction. And third, in terms of the view from below that I have argued for, (in her case reproduction versus production) this can be worked with. She never tells us why this is a better view, but she does demonstrate it. We need to take her advice and work out contemporary versions of answers to all these questions.

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<sup>11</sup>I am deliberately using her terms here. She often refers to male and female experiences, but some other times to men's and women's experiences. Every now and then she talks about feminist perceptions, but never, so far as I can tell about masculinist perceptions. These are important distinctions, and her elision of them is one of the factors that leads some to read her as a biological determinist. More on this follows.

<sup>2</sup>See for example Donna Haraway's chapter "Universal Donors in a Vampire Culture" and her discussion of OncoMouse™ (1997). See also Fredric Jameson, Chapter 1, 1991.

<sup>3</sup>See for example Seyla Benhabib's discussion in "Epistemologies of Postmodernism."

<sup>4</sup>Achilles was one of the first to want to be born again in legend and song. He prayed that he would do some great thing before he died and so could live on after his bodily death.

<sup>5</sup>See also Ollman's statement: "Dialectics restructures our thinking about reality by replacing the common-sense notion of 'thing' as something that *has* a history and *has* external connections to other things, with notions of 'process' which contains its history and possible futures, and 'relation,' which contains as a part of what it is its ties with other relations" (1993, 11).

<sup>6</sup>Note my own similar concerns in the chapter on Arendt—one of the few theorists to stress birth, and the chapter on the agonistic community

in the ancient world (Hartsock 1983). But here I am following her terminology rather than either my own or those of contemporary feminist theorists.

<sup>7</sup>I am aware of the difficulties with the term experience in the '90s, but O'Brien makes a much better case than most for exactly how gendered experience is constructed, in the process of reproduction, and how women's rather than men's experience could change the categories.

<sup>8</sup>Judith Butler is only the best known theorist of this sort. While I found *Gender Trouble* less than satisfactory in its implications for the power of human will to create whatever personae we wish, I found *Bodies That Matter* a more sophisticated meditation on the ways bodies (supposedly natural) were socially constructed. But nature made no appearance as part of the equation.

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, my effort to develop these ideas in *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited*.

<sup>10</sup>See my essay "The Feminist Standpoint" in *Money, Sex, and Power*.

<sup>11</sup>Marquez's work makes important points about incommensurable realities. He argues that ordinary people who have read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* have found no surprise, because "I'm telling them nothing

that hasn't happened in their own lives" (Marquez qtd. in Sangari 164).

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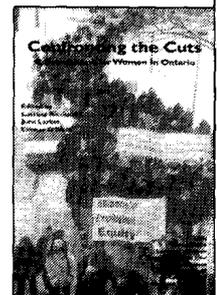
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