

An Erudite and Original Challenge

Publishing *The Politics of Reproduction*

BY PHILIPPA BREWSTER

It was my pleasure and privilege to be Mary O'Brien's editor on her pioneering book, *The Politics of Reproduction*, which Routledge and Kegan Paul (RKP, before it metamorphosed into merely Routledge) published in 1981. Dale Spender introduced me to the book and its author. "It's a remarkable book, by a remarkable feminist thinker," she said, "publish it and speedily." Dale was of course right—on all counts. When I'd read the manuscript of *The Politics of Reproduction*, which Mary had kindly sent me from Toronto, I proposed the book in those very terms to my colleagues on RKP's editorial board. "A philosopher?" they said, in tones of discovery (female philosophers being a new sort of animal to them). "Deals with Plato and his successors?" they added, their voices now tinged with respect. "Proposes the revolution in reproduction as one of the twentieth century's most significant influences—goodness gracious, this we must see!" they concluded.

So RKP supported the book and our strategy was to publish it first of all in a hardcover edition: it's a "reviewer's book" we all agreed.

Reading *The Politics of Reproduction* changed the life of one of my colleagues at RKP, even before it was set into type. So engaged with the strength of its arguments and the approach of its author was the copyeditor that she left RKP the following fall to study for the first Women's Studies MA to be set up in Britain.

How speedily did we publish *The Politics of Reproduction*? Did I have my first opportunity to meet Mary and Cath in Toronto before or after publication? The sequence of events is hazy. I do remember that the book needed minimal editing, that the proofs, corrected by the author, went missing between Toronto and London. This is of course an author's nightmare, which Mary handled, and handled with tolerance, rather than sending RKP's copyediting department and myself to a hell of her own devising as she should have done. The book arrived, substantial, serious-looking in a green, typographic jacket: no image, no fuss.

I cannot recollect what the reviews said, or who reviewed it in Britain and North America. I called someone at Routledge to ask how I might locate the reviews. He said, mysteriously, "they will be in Reading." Reading University is where the RKP archives are to be found: Mary O'Brien's *The Politics of Reproduction* is somewhere there

in a dusty file, alongside RKP's other distinguished authors: Simone Weil, Ludwig Wittgenstein, C.G. Jung, Iris Murdoch....

On my own bookshelves, the paperback edition of *The Politics of Reproduction* rubs shoulders with Millett, Firestone, de Beauvoir, and their successors. The book is of course a major work of feminist thought, original, erudite, challenging. I don't

believe that it is still in print, and searches on the Internet reveal that *Reproducing the World*, too, is not currently available. However, on the train yesterday reading a fine new article on "Motherhood and Apple Pie," by English feminist writer Helen Carr, there it is, *The Politics of Reproduction*, referred to, footnoted and fresh on the page with its insights and ideas.

If I may add a short personal acknowledgement to Mary O'Brien. My meetings with Mary always left me exhausted and inspired. Here was a role model if ever there was one, an activist on the left of British politics, who changed horses in the middle of her life, to write a confident, erudite feminist challenge to nothing less than "male-stream" thought. Spending a few days with Mary and Cath in Toronto, a precious memory is of Mary talking to me into the early hours of the morning, in a benevolent fog of cigarette smoke and with huge energy and humour, about all sorts of matters, many of which were way over my head, just as if I were her equal and not the young, newish editor I was.

Philippa Brewster's publishing career has included building the feminist studies list at Routledge and Kegan Paul and co-founding and running the Pandora Press imprint.



THE POLITICS OF REPRODUCTION

A LECTURE BY MARY O'BRIEN

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