

Whatever Happened to Sex?

BY JILL VICKERS

How much I miss Mary! Oh, of course, I miss *her* with her warmth and humour and ability to put the devils of the malestream into perspective for me. But those have been gone awhile. Even though I had already lost Mary to Alzheimer's, her death saddened me. For Cath, I know this loss is fresher and more devastating, and I send love through the ether as we all did when Mary was in a coma in an Ottawa hospital.

But Mary's final passage also made me realize how much I miss her ideas within feminism. Where have they gone—and whatever happened to sex? Mary's enormous insight that women and men perceive the world differently in some things at least because we have a different reproductive consciousness unlocked for me the deepest puzzles of political thought. She said that women have to make birth as central to political thought as men have made death.

Where has that insight gone? It seems to me now lost to feminism and I want to understand why.

I recall that one of my reactions to *The Politics of Reproduction* was to argue with Mary that women in different contexts would experience some aspects of reproduction differently and so their reproductive consciousness would also differ. My work focused on "third world" women then (as now) as well as political theory, so I was excited that her theory opened up our ability to compare how women in different contexts experienced reproduction. Events overtook the dialogue we might have had, however, as women whose experiences had been excluded by our construction of "difference" primarily between "women" and "men."

Nancy Fraser, in *Justice Interruptus* traces the path North American feminists' struggles with difference, identities, and recognition then took and I will not repeat it here. In the course of it, however, Mary's insights about shared women's reproductive consciousness were rejected as "difference" displaced commonality. As a consequence, "sex" in the sense of our capacity (if not our choice) to reproduce the species physically has been lost sight of. This, I believe is deeply problematic as it shuts us off from understanding the central experiences of hundreds of millions of women worldwide.

Let me just note just two of the critical issues in feminist political science which can only be unlocked if we restore some consideration of "reproductive sex" to the centre of

feminist analysis. First, however much it is the case that women's experiences of "reproductive sex" are shaped by their location, women worldwide are still fighting for reproductive rights (some for the right to reproduce; others for the right not to) including safe abortion, maternal and child health, child care and security for themselves and their families.

If we banish "reproductive sex" from our analyses, our distance as feminists from Aboriginal women, women with disabilities, race-minority women here and in the post-Soviet and "third world" countries will get worse rather than better. Because we have demoted "reproductive sex" from our analyses we have failed to understand the power of "radical mothers" in the democratization movements in Latin America or in movements for change in Europe and North America.

Another of Mary's insights provides clues to another reason why "reproductive sex" has seemingly vanished from our theories. She argued that with contraceptive technologies, women now face a situation in which reproduction became a conscious and deliberate act, therefore, also a moral and a political act. I think many women in affluent, western countries are actually in flight against this insight. Indeed, the reaction of the English- and Franco-Quebec women's movements to the new reproductive technologies virtually ignored the profound changes in women's lives which being able to choose to reproduce or not involves. These are changes we need to explore philosophically.

Oh would that Mary were with us still. Indeed, perhaps she is, both in the ideas she left for us and in the ideas they may inspire in young women of the third wave.

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