

## **Motherhood and Care: (still) Women's Destiny?**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to look at a theme which has been much analysed in Women's Studies and elsewhere: motherhood. There has been a return to viewing motherhood as an experience with obvious biological foundations but above all as a social construct which patriarchal societies have used to control women. Specifically, we give a voice to 'non-mothers', who are still today seen as surprising, as somehow anomalous, strange, even threatening. Noting that motherhood rhetoric and cultural pressures – still very much a feature of Italian life – have not sufficed to reverse a demographic trend, we explore the category of 'care'. The idea is that questioning the intrinsically feminine nature of caring as exalted in motherhood, gives us the chance to construct a 'culture of care and conviviality' on the basis of their shared role as 'sons and daughters'. Shared origins on which to build new, non-hierarchical, sharing relationships.

**Keywords:** gender, maternity, patriarchy, gylany.

## 1. Women (only) mothers

Since the dawn of time – or so we are told<sup>1</sup> – the traditional division of labour in the West has hinged on the (supposed) male/female symbiosis in the production/reproduction duality<sup>2</sup>. Men working in the outside world, in public life *producing* goods, trading, doing business. Women working inside the home in physical *reproduction* (pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding) and in its evolutionary and symbolic variants - looking after others (children, above all, but also the ill, infirm, elderly and... their menfolk). It is a division with roots in the ‘natural’ anatomic difference between the sexes and the basis of a trajectory which has already been traced, an approach which does not take account of the individual characteristics and expectations of men and, above all, women, and thus risks taking the form of mandatory destiny.

In the context of a wide-ranging debate still raging in Italy on the subject of male violence<sup>3</sup>, a contribution by Pigozzi (2013) stands out for its identification of a sort of ‘neo-matriarchy’ as a new scenario on the rise featuring a quasi-violent competitiveness between women in which the classic fairy tale question «who is the fairest of them all» is replaced with «who is the most maternal of them all?». Some would perhaps see this as a women’s victory as a result of its aesthetic acknowledgement of the ‘true’ female realm. In actual fact, it once again emphasises only one (and a non-defining one at that) of the many dimensions of womanhood and probably by means precisely of that which has always been the maximum expression of male domination. «No motherhood related

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<sup>1</sup> The extent to which the founding narrative of Western society is still today based on earlier societies structured and characterised in patriarchal terms (Judaic-Christian and Greek civilisation) is incredible. Thus Zoja’s 2010 essay on male violence with its references to Greek mythology and the origin and basis of human society makes us a little uneasy with its risk of reading natural roots and instincts into already well established, defined patriarchal socio-cultural constructs. Riane Eisler’s (1987) innovative reconstruction of the development of human society restores to our origins quite different – and more comforting – roots. Other authors before her had suggested other origins (Bachofen 1861; Gimbutas 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Our main observation context is Italy, although the bibliography also contains many foreign, especially theoretical, texts. This is because, as Saraceno has also claimed (1987), every society has its own specific gender-system, i.e. a specific range of attributions of meaning and content regarding membership of the male or female sex and gender relations.

<sup>3</sup> There is nothing random about my reference here to the theme of gender-based violence, because one of the motives that prompted us to reflect on motherhood is precisely the nexus between the motherhood rhetoric and the subordinate role of women. In this context, women’s assertion of freedom and autonomy is unacceptable and often meets with violent reactions from partners or ex-partners. This theme will be taken up in the course of the essay.

choice is value neutral, an end in itself, a simple consequence of a personal or a couple's whim but always echoes through society and responds to a collective imagination which ends up suppressing individual choice» (Cirant 2012b, 14). It is thus evidently difficult even for modern women to free themselves of the eternal motherhood role, to understand and make others understand that motherhood is not the be-all and end-all of femininity. It is certainly true that women have achieved new identities, greater autonomy and reduced dependency on family life but for centuries it has been motherhood which has covered women with glory.

The over emphasis on women's self-realisation in motherhood has, in fact, very deep roots which penetrate deep into that system of historical and socio-cultural structures which makes up the «male order» (Bourdieu 1998, 17) internalised by all in unconscious perception and evaluation mechanisms:

universally applicable thought systems which function as natural dissimilarities, objective differences, leftovers and distinguishing traits (in body matter, for example) which they themselves contribute to bringing into existence and simultaneously 'naturalise' by inserting them into a system of differences all of which are apparently natural. [...] The mythical-ritual system [...] consecrates the established order and gives it the status of known, official knowledge (ibid. 16).

Even gender differences are made to appear part of the natural order of things. The male body better suited to strength, command and the outer sphere of public life. The female body naturally designed for looking after, protecting, accommodating others... and thus for the private *reproductive* function. As mothers «loved and venerated» but also «reduced to servitude», as De Beauvoir wrote more than sixty years ago (2008, 220). Because this is the established order, for both men and women in the same way.

No woman is a stranger to the motherhood issue. [...] The fact that women still today undergo one of the strongest cultural identifications in terms of the real or potential motherhood role, are acknowledged as social beings both positively and negatively only, or above all in relation to their reproductive capacity justifies all the attention paid to the 'motherhood issue' (Fossati, Mazzonis 1976, 67).

There are even more important considerations in Fossati and Mazzonis' non-recent essay. First of all, motherhood is cited in relation to fatherhood as *one* of many possible experiences for men<sup>4</sup>. Why then has it been said – and is still said – that self-realisation is a matter of parenthood<sup>5</sup>? Why is it that for women, individual complexities which integrate or attempt to integrate multiple and multifaceted desires, dreams, aspirations and expectations have been reduced to a *single* dimension which, for this very reason, takes the form of destiny and not free choice? The unease felt by all or virtually all women on this subject is also striking: those who have children, those who don't and would like to have them and those who have never wanted them. Further confirmation of the fact that the issue is not one which can simply be brushed aside as something which is linked to women's biological predisposition, to a presumed natural instinct. Things are certainly a little more ambivalent and complex than this, perhaps even ambiguous. Once again, the – to tell the truth alarming – association between motherhood and power is important because there is a risk of female connivance with the patriarchal system in it. A basic ambiguity exists in all female desire to have children. If women, as non-mothers, are considered at best sexual objects then leaving home, creating a family and, above all, having children would give them a certain, safe identity linked to the sense of being worth something, of counting for something finally. As if motherhood alone gives women the right «to speak as women» (Mapelli, Peretti 2012, 85). And male children would seem to increase this effect.

Power: the reasoning knot tightens once more. When one has power, whatever its type or dimensions, there is always a temptation to use it. Thus women make themselves indispensable and irreplaceable to their children (as well as to their

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<sup>4</sup> Over the last twenty years social science literature has paid a great deal of attention to male and fatherhood crises and, at the same time, triggered off much thought on the concept of the 'new' father. *Men's Studies* is of particular interest in this regard in Italy too (including work by Connell 1986 and 2009<sup>2</sup>, Ciccone 2009 and Ruspini 2012).

<sup>5</sup> The distinction introduced by Sara Ruddick (1989, 2007) between '*motherhood*' as an 'institution' and thus as a social role which entirely absorbs a woman's identity and '*mothering*' as a 'practice', distinct and separate from the mother's identity is an interesting one. The pivotal role of motherhood as a specific theme, in the wake of Sara Ruddick's arguments as well as those of Adrienne Rich (1976) and Patricia Hill Collins (1997), led in 2006 to the birth of *Motherhood Studies* as a discipline in its own right (O'Reilly 2009).

partners/husbands) who first take advantage of them and then become dependent on them.

It is not surprising, then, that when Badinter published *Le Conflit. La femme et la mère* in 2010, it triggered off a great deal of controversy in France and, a year later, in Italy. Almost as if motherhood is not a matter for discussion, that no doubt can be cast on maternal instinct because it is an untouchable certainty, something natural and not a feeling which is linked to specific socio-cultural contexts as Badinter had already demonstrated in 1980. Because mothers are mothers, because, as we know, there's only one mother. And she's untouchable.

Perhaps, however, as a still open issue with a great deal still to be explored in depth, the question needs 'touching'<sup>6</sup> because it can throw light on an original, profound aspect in human beings.

## **2. Women who don't have children**

It would seem, then, that motherhood is still women's destiny. All women. Despite feminism, despite the innumerable and not necessarily inevitable victories of the 1960s. For some time now there has been talk of a «gender backlash» (Faludi 1991), meaning a U-turn, that all the victories of the 1960s are not, at the end of the day, as certain as they seemed, that culture, like history, does not necessarily move in a straight, progressive line. And it is a further reason to re-open certain debates.

Women are once again to be told to have children and breastfeed them and perhaps to give up their own ambitions for years to devote themselves to them<sup>7</sup>: at the end of the day, why look elsewhere when happiness is at arm's reach for all women? This pressing family centred rhetoric cancels out all motherhood's ambiguities and contradictions, the dark side which all human experience necessarily brings with it to target it to a

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<sup>6</sup> McQuillan *et al.* (2015), for example, underline that studies on fertility trends in the USA should quantify the importance of motherhood for women rather than simply assuming it exists.

<sup>7</sup> Whatever the dominant rhetoric, feminist autobiography as a literary form would seem to point in quite a different direction, towards the potential, from the starting point of one's own specific motherhood experience, to connect it to its social, cultural and political dimensions (see Hager 2015).

pacification experience, happiness and self-realisation as a ‘mirror’ (if your children are happy, you are happy).

Badinter (1980 and 2010), however, writes that the perfect mother does not exist and that a mother’s love is ‘simply’ a human emotion. And, like all emotions, it is uncertain, fragile and imperfect. Contrary to popular belief, perhaps it is not really so profoundly inherent in female nature. A careful analysis of maternal behaviour, in fact, shows that interest and devotion may or may not show themselves. Tenderness may be there, but it may also be absent. This French philosopher also denounces the proliferation of new female models which place necessarily happy motherhood centre stage once again, motherhood as women’s only route to self-fulfilment.

Whilst doubt has not been cast on certain of the victories of the recent past such as the right to contraception and artificial breastfeeding, it is, however, true that social and cultural pressures do exist – above all at times of crisis like today’s – which tend to thrust women back into traditional roles as housewives (and, naturally, motherhood). The idea that nature requires of women self-sacrifice, total devotion to others, total self-obliteration<sup>8</sup>... has returned as a more or less explicit undercurrent in common sense, media debates and also in academic publications or pseudo versions of them.

But it is nothing to do with nature. Motherhood cannot be as natural as it is claimed to be if all this emphasis on exalting this confinement to a role which is, in reality, increasingly a matter of choice is needed. Choices which many do take, more or less freely, often at the cost of considerable dissatisfaction and frustration with more or less dramatic conflicts between one’s roles as woman, woman-mother and woman-mother-other. Also because, whilst we might have been told the opposite for centuries, not all women are born to be mothers and not all women want to be mothers or mothers in the same way. Real life stories of those who have wanted and been able to make alternative choices (or even those who have found themselves in alternative situations against their will) bring out different stories, lives and desires whatever the socio-cultural rhetoric both ancient and modern.

Today’s experience of (non-) motherhood is an ambivalent one. An essayist who has explored the issue in her own personal experience and in listening to women in the same

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Rich 1976; Forna 1998, Hager 2011.

situation – at the limit of the biological cycle –, with a great many questions and, for now, no children, has written as follows:

On one hand it is a choice we can make as a consequence of the historic progress made by Western women. On the other, it is something that we cannot choose on pain of expulsion from the world of motherhood, a legitimate and legitimising world from every point of view (social, psychological, political, symbolic, historic, etc.). Choosing motherhood or otherwise [...] [is] a case in point which highlights the way that human nature always takes shape in culture because our natures exist only in our interpretations of the symbolic (Cirant 2012b, 11).

Culture not nature on the issue of motherhood: an intriguing beginning.

A woman without children in Italy is still a woman with a minus sign next to her name, a sign which she carries around with her and is often asked to explain. It is for this reason that any doubts she may have about her decision are constantly brought up again. Whilst non-motherhood is no longer stigmatised today, it is still seen as an eccentric or strange decision, perhaps a selfish choice or one which is dictated by bad luck. The discomfort it causes may vary but childless women are constantly being called on to explain something that isn't there, something they haven't given which is evidently obligatory. Pressure and expectations around non-motherhood are

unpleasant and put those involved constantly on the alert on the subject of the validity of their choices and their ability to decide what is right for them. Abstract motherhood as an instinct, like a fixed and unquestioned fact, as a combination of arguments and practices, cohabits today with real life motherhood and non-motherhood with all its compromises, contradictions, contrasting desires and, often, conflictuality, the primary struggle is that between desire for motherhood and the desire for independence. [...] The question of whether I/we want children or can have them implies looking at motherhood not as something which is desirable in itself but as one experience amongst many which some women may not want enough or not want at all (ibid., 108).

These women in their thirties and forties seem on one hand to have more options than they did in the past. It seems evident that motherhood is not and must not be obligatory but simply one of many potential experiences thanks above all to the irresistible force of feminist struggles. On the other hand, it sometimes seems that this freedom is more burdensome than the alternative giving women fewer certainties, greater doubts and burdens (than the 'women of 1968' who cleared the way, who were the first to collectively challenge the non-motherhood taboo).

This paradox can perhaps be explained with a few 'cumulative' hypotheses. Because the difference between these two generations is very clear if we compare Cirant's stories with the Leonardi and Vigliani (2009) interviews, a series of conversations with 'special women', many of whom took part in the 1970s movements. Not that it was easy for them. Not that they had no doubts or questions at all. However, for almost all those interviewed, the primary feeling was satisfaction and the certainty of having made the right choice. They have no doubts about not having had children (perhaps an occasional desire for grandmotherhood) and a certainty that it has been precisely the fact that they haven't had to look after children that has made their lives enjoyable, important and significant: work, social and political commitment, the sense of freedom, female friendships and relationships with men.

Perhaps because when a taboo is broken (and such a high calibre taboo) you either do it or you don't (a third way doesn't even present itself) or perhaps because the evidence of these women was collected at a time in their lives in which there was no turning back (they are all presumably 'in menopause') and thus there was now nothing to discuss while younger women can still change their minds at the last minute and perhaps resort to reproductive techniques. Or perhaps because the socio-cultural and economic context of forty years ago was open and promising and thus choices could truly be seen in this way. While today's situation, its economic uncertainty, variable bonds and multiplicity of reference models increases the complexity of choice making any decision somehow always precarious, changeable and never definitive. Or perhaps because the feminists of the day were not alone but part of a collective wave which made women powerful together and also provided a sort of shared armour within which they could act out their experiences. Nothing like today's individualistic and compartmentalised context in



which anyone who is unconventional bears the full burden of solitude. Another, non-alternative hypothesis: the older generation found solace – not in a break but rather in a continuum with the biological experience – in the concept of ‘symbolic motherhood’, a structured theory supported above all by the Diotima philosophy school (1987, 1992) which – emphasising female difference to the extent of risking to stereotype it<sup>9</sup> – suggested that women without their own children find a role for themselves in any case in the *symbolic motherhood order* as teachers, educators, aunts, friends or daughters. Each was to guide the others, act as reference point in the full-blown exaltation of women’s ability to form bonds with and look after other women thus, first, recovering the value of maternity whilst at the same time asserting that motherhood was not obligatory. It is perhaps too much of a niche thought system, however emphaticised in the 1990s, too intellectual and too unconnected with real women’s everyday experiences, perhaps not convincing or attractive enough for new generations (or least for the women interviewed by Cirant) who are more interested in focusing on their own specific experiences than on exalting that of one half of humanity whilst neglecting the destiny of the other half. Or lastly we might hypothesise that the generational difference had more to do with the gender backlash mentioned above.

*Lego Friends*<sup>10</sup> which today targets consumers with pink, purple and violet constructions and imagined themes (swimming pools, barbecues, bakers, villas, etc.) are one of the many signs of a return to increasingly traditional gender roles alongside the ever presence of the so-called *Mulino Bianco* family with mothers and fathers whose

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<sup>9</sup> The central concept of the philosophy of difference is phallogocentrism, with which Luce Irigaray (1974, 1985, 2012) denounced the extent to which the focus on the rationality *logos* in the Western context actually originated in and is marked out by the basic phallogocentrism of the civilisations which this culture expresses. Work in Italy includes that of Muraro (1991, 2012), co-founder of the Diotima school; Cigarini 1996; Lonzi 1974 and Cavarero 1987, 1997, 2007, 2002. More recent reflections in the Gender Studies context have tended to focus on individual experiences rather than any specific and/or essential features of sexual identity which are not necessarily postulated as dualistic. I am thinking here of the work of Butler (1990, 1993) or Sedgwick (1990) which have, together with that of others, generated so-called ‘queer theory’, a sphere of thought and research which deconstructs sexual and gender identity aimed at stripping away those power mechanisms which guarantee the continuity of heterosexual hegemony and the dualist logic. Queer theory clearly merits a more in-depth study than there is room for here.

<sup>10</sup> A recent female version of the multi coloured plastic piece game which 1970s children played with and were free to imagine and build anything they liked with.

roles in the family are as clear as their family bonds and tasks (who cooks, drives, cleans, etc.) in advertising are examples of this and there are many more.

Are we simply and tragically going backwards or are we inside a spiral «in which it sometimes feels as if we are turning around on ourselves but perhaps we are still always moving a little further on?» (Cirant, 2012a, 109)

It is a fact that despite – or perhaps precisely because of – the mother focus which is so ever present in our cultural or pseudo cultural production, more and more women in Italy are deciding against motherhood. «One in five doesn't» (Cirant 2012b), i.e. 20% of Italian women born in 1970, according to ISTAT figures, will have decided not to have children by the end of their fertile years as against 3% of those born in 1960 and 1940. And there is no sign of this trend being reversed. Do the material, emotional, psychological and, above all, cultural conditions which might change this exist?

There's a certain savage pleasure in saying 'no' to motherhood or not in these conditions. Giving birth must be an act of joy not of sacrifice, an act of power not of submission. Mine is an act which takes up and passes on the challenge. But that's not all - not yet. There's pleasure in saying no to restrictions. I've too much to give to the world to limit myself to giving just to one person. [...] I've found that this way of being a woman in the world is a disturbance. It would seem that when a woman's principal role is not motherhood but citizen there is always someone ready to put her back where she belongs (Cirant 2012a, 121).

When we try to be other, different, alternative from that which is predestined, other people are scared. Just as with witches who were free women, women who made alternative choices, women who refused to accept the role which had been assigned to them, who did not resign themselves to a predestined role and threatened male hegemony (and a certain idea of the family) and, above all refused to submit to their motherhood destiny.

Witches were persecuted because they refused to fit in, because they did not resign themselves, because they chose their own 'destinies' and refused to have gender identities imposed on them (etymologically: staying still, fixed). Perhaps light-

heartedly, lifting up from wherever they were and where someone would like them to stay, perhaps flying off on a broomstick.

Shamans responded to the precarious nature of tribe life – drought, illness and malign influences – by cancelling out their own body weight and transporting themselves to other worlds, other perception planes where they could muster the strength to modify reality. In centuries and civilisations closer to ours, in villages in which women had to bear the heavier burden of a life of restrictions, witches flew by night on broomsticks and also on lighter weight means such as ears of wheat or straw. Before they were codified by the inquisition these visions were part of the popular imagination or even of everyday life. I believe that this bond between the desire to rise into the air and privation is an anthropological constant (Calvino 1993, 33).

‘Childless’ women’s experiences also tell us of and remind us of this.

### **3. Patriarchy, power and gylany**

The maternal role – above all if it is part of an overall attempt to reduce women to stereotypes – is, as we have said, one of the most effective devices at the disposal of the patriarchal system to keep women under control. Perhaps also as a reaction against female fertility, from an ensemble of sexual and emotional and perhaps dependence frustration and unacknowledged envy, physical strength, ignorance and the separation of the mind from its emotional roots, in patriarchy man has created a system which has relegated women to a biological dimension and kept them there (Rich 1976). By means of power and control over women as mothers, men have ensured their ownership of their children. By means of power and control they have ensured their property has remained intact and continuity after their deaths. It is as if male identity itself has hinged on power since the most remote times and on a very specific power too, that *over others* starting with women and children.

Power is thus an all-encompassing concept. Erotic love – which could/should be a matter of the tension involved in getting to know another person, the obscure but fascinating search for otherness and difference which diversity offers or gives us a glimpse of – is turned into a bond which excludes exploration and symmetry, which barter knowledge with possession. And deploys structural asymmetry, a prevarication based on a necessary dichotomy. Because for one person to be powerful others must be weak or impotent. This omnipotence-impotence relationship is an organising principle perceived as natural which is given special emphasis in the male-female relationship but is also inherent in the social order, institutions, education, thought and language as a whole. After thousands of years of scientific, cultural and social thought passed on by men (and seen as value neutral and universal) in ‘male’ words and styles with men centre stage, it would be pointless to imagine that a single century, or a little less, of feminism could really have toppled patriarchy’s innermost structures. Whilst this system shows signs of ceding, it is still clearly deep rooted above all in our innermost social, cultural and psychological mechanisms.

What does it mean to live within a male vision perpetuated by individuals and, above all, by institutions, cultures, beliefs which have made this vision universal, confusing one part of society for the whole thing somewhat paradoxically via separations and divisions? Male culture sees its own central role and accordance with the norm as natural and has thus disregarded the «problematic issue of the social construction of gender identity» (Ciccone, Mapelli 2012b, 12) and to this can be added men’s invisibility to themselves, an inability to «see the partiality of their own sexualised experience and thus their experience *tout court* which Victor Seidler has interpreted as a consequence of the tendency to speak for the world» (*ibid*). In separating man as object of consciousness from the object of inquiry, male culture has established a split self and also created other divisions, other dualisms which are the basis of the Western *logos* in particular: human being/nature, internal/external, rational/irrational, positive/negative, male/female. And to be able to speak for the world, to be able to rule men have also suppressed their connection to their own emotions, with our most fundamental relationships thus denying the need to accept partiality: «Men’s silence on the subject of themselves is intimately linked to their social function and the model of subjectivity

connected to it» (*ibid*). After this historic separation (*logos/eros*) very few attempts have been made to discover alternative forms, languages or systems to those based on scientific reason. The use of the word ‘rational’ relegates everything that we refuse to examine to the opposite and the result is that we end up assuming that we are immune to irrationality without attempting to understand the very ambiguity, ambivalence and non-linearity which makes it up. And reason – the *logos* – without *eros* is pure ideology and blurs our approach to the world because it is partial and confuses one part with the whole. This rationalistic reading, in fact, cannot account for the complexity and ambivalence of human life as recent epistemological approaches also confirm<sup>11</sup>.

Women have always traditionally been attributed with irrationality, closeness to nature, with a chthonic, subterranean and obscure bond with the earth in a hierarchical approach to rationality/irrationality, culture/nature and the light/dark dichotomy which demotes the second term in more or less explicit ways. Repudiating dichotomy and dualism (apart from the male/female one) results, then, not only in reconstructing human experience in general in more realistic terms but also in reaffirming women’s lives in their entirety and also of all those who have been defined negatively for centuries: the ‘untouchables’, ‘non-whites’, the ‘illiterate’, the ‘disabled’, ‘non-citizens’ and non-heterosexuals.

Motherhood is power too. And apparently a female one, perhaps the only one. But controlled and manipulated by men in patriarchal culture it should perhaps rather be referred to as ‘domesticated’. Probably because it is too great a power, an unthinkable and unmanageable power, perhaps because female fertility, if it is not adequately contextualised, is impossible to deal with or support. It is a fear whose roots go deep in the desire for and irresistible attraction (for those who have not been brought up with it) of otherness which sometimes – often, too often – turns into violence and not only symbolic violence against women (including and above all against men’s own partners<sup>12</sup>). Patriarchy has betrayed men, separated them from themselves, from their innermost and deepest selves and entrusted them with public roles and private

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the previously mentioned work by Irigaray and, amongst others, Braidotti 1994 and 1996; De Lauretis 1996 and 1999; Garavaso, Vassallo 2007.

<sup>12</sup> On the bond between love and violence, see Lea Melandri 2011 and Melandri, Ciccone 2011.

responsibilities which they have not always been able to manage or maintain<sup>13</sup>. But it has always been and still is patriarchy which ensures privilege.

However, anthropological and archaeological learning, at a certain point, led to another story becoming current, a story which has thrown further light on the non-universality and/or inevitability of the patriarchal family, a story which tells of matriarchal or gylanic phases (Eisler 1987<sup>14</sup>), ancient stages in human evolution in which women played a central role in organisations and beliefs. These were historical periods in which societies were founded on other symbolic, cultural and spiritual orders which show that brutality, domination, force and hierarchy between the sexes are not biologically determined and ‘natural’ but are actually the outcome of the predominance of an andocratic, authoritarian and violent cultural and social model, of the victory of the ‘sword’ over the ‘chalice’. This is a model which the patriarchal *logos* then took on as the story of our historical origins and evolution transforming it into an absolute fact to be taken as given, natural and, precisely, original. Falsely. It is a self-confirming discourse which produces and feeds symbols, habits of speech and action, material culture and interpretations of real life and human relationships based on a hierarchy which has made itself a system. That *logos* which then progressively took root in us, in our minds and bodies, generating a civilisation which destroys its own offspring, a civilisation which feeds off violence and injustice, which generates multiple but interconnected forms of domination and exploitation, which has made inequality and hierarchy its primary, founding principles, the principles of its self-affirmation, perpetrating an effectively deadly world.

If there is the remotest possibility that an alternative to this has existed it is important to say so in order to add a parallel image to the symbolic patriarchal model, one which can speak to the sexes and genders which are attributed to us. It is a model with links to a more respectful relationship with nature because a framework which

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<sup>13</sup> For an analysis of the costs of patriarchy on men, see Bellassai 2004; Dell’Agnese, Ruspini 2007; Deiana, Greco 2012; Volpato 2013; Gusmano, Manganella 2014. For the international context, see Connell 2009<sup>2</sup>; Dulong, Guionnet, Neveu 2012.

<sup>14</sup> The ‘gylany’ (neologism coined by Riane Eisler, 1987) is the fruit of the Greek word *gyné* (woman) and *andròs* (man) bound together by the letter ‘l’ which in Greek derives from the verb *lyen* or *lyo* (explain/ resolve and release/free) indicating a co-operative relationship between men and women. Gylany is more convincing than matriarchy, above all, if the latter is interpreted as corresponding to patriarchy and thus ‘women’s power’ or rather mother’s power.

justifies and reproduces domination over women and nature also affirms, justifies and reproduces domination over animals, the poor and colonised peoples, refuting and undermining ethics based on empathy, compassion, care for others like that which occurred in matriarchal societies (Colombini, Di Bernardo 2013, 12).

By means of a decolonisation of the capitalist economic techno-nihilist imagination (Magatti 2009), a refutation of the model of infinite growth and a return to the gift economy,

economic models which promote sharing, care and conviviality and a new concept of time understood not as time/money quantified in terms of the production of goods but as time dedicated to looking after community and recovering social relationships» might become conceivable (Colombini, Di Bernardo 2013, 13).

A partnership between human beings, an enhanced and diffused fertility, not simply female destiny, for a new emphasis on relationships and bonds. A way to enhance caring between women, between men, between men and women and also between human beings and the natural world.

#### **4. Origins, love and fragility: will a new re-cognition save us?**

Let's explore the concept of 'care'. Without doubt that this is one of the main spheres in which women's and men's destinies have been played out and separated from one another. Females give birth to young and look after them – this certainly has something to do with biological essence and difference. But everything that comes later – and in actual fact before as far as imagined desires, projections, duties and rights are concerned – is the fruit of cultural constructions which are often turned into limits, restrictions, unresolvable bottlenecks and other people's plans. Because it is from this primordial 'vocation' that women initiated and/or were initiated into care for others as their 'biological destiny': «looking after everything and everyone, including men, who can then devote themselves to other things and also invent the myth of independence as the

creation of masculinity because someone else will look after their various needs» (Mapelli 2012, 10).

But everyone experiences the need to be looked after when they are born. We come into the world naked, impotent and fragile. Which essentially means «understanding that we are children, that we were born from someone. That we *come into being* as a result of care, are summoned up by emotions which gave birth to us and, as is often said, brought us “into the light”» (Lizzola 2009, 10). Every image of self-sufficiency, then, is a contradiction in terms, a negation of all that we are as human beings. Not only are we born dependent but increasingly often we also age and die fragile and needing the care of others. And this is true for both women and men. We are aware of the extent to which such narratives are potent engines of change and innovation or conservation. That is to say, continually reiterating the male/female diversity paradigm only accentuates this reality or perception of reality. Just as the counter narrative can give us an insight – whatever the undeniable biological differences but above all of the history and culture which have accorded precise meanings to such differences thus emphasising and applying a hierarchical order to them – into what we have in common as human beings, what makes us similar whatever our individual differences and endless nuances. Making a significant experience of non-autonomy, of not being able, as newborns, of continuing to live only as a result of the will of others (just as we were born as a result of the will of others). Otherness is thus not only an element in our potential for learning, of widening our experience of ourselves, of ‘identification’ via differentiation but, much more radically, indicates our potential to be/not to be and to survive/go under.

Thus women and men experience an original relationship dependence and essential fragility which goes beyond the omnipotence rhetoric which is such a feature in particular of the myth of youth and not only male youth. The sensation is that - incapable of dealing with and re-working this fragility – our culture has opted for a shortcut involving assigning the power to reassure to our mothers. We are subjected to personal psychological pressure, which later becomes social, requiring certainty, comfort and reassurance. Mothers – true mothers – love you always, never abandon you, cannot but love you more than anything else and will love you more than anyone else will both now or in the future.



Women who have already been mothers go along with this game. As their children grow up, they realise that their love is not perfect and above all that it is not constant and not necessarily 'at any cost' but they can't or don't want to say so. Perhaps women also connive to some extent with the patriarchal system in this too. It is difficult to admit that our mothers did not love us as we would have wished just as it is difficult to admit that we do not love our children as we should and would like to. As we are told that mothers know how to and have to love them.

But the woman who gave birth to us is a person with her own power and fragility, with her potential to love (and do/be other things as well) but not necessarily, not unconditionally.

A failure to re-elaborate the ambivalence and contradictions inherent in this original experience is what leads to different outcomes for men and women but this fits perfectly into traditional relationship models between the two sexes: men looking for/finding partners/wives who are models of faithfulness and absolute devotion (remembered from their own mothers) and women who reproduce maternal care in their relationships with their partners too. Two different and complementary models of behaviour which could originate precisely in this failure to consider the extreme ambivalence of our arrival in the world with its connotations of life but also of dependency, fragility, limitation (pre-figuring, at the end of the day, our deaths).

Thus it would perhaps be better to shift the emphasis of our considerations on motherhood from a perspective which sees it as a specifically female domain to one which acknowledges it as our original human experience focusing attention on the birth itself – everyone comes from someone other than him/herself and lives thanks to the care of that other person. A deeper and re-worked awareness of having been conceived and looked after would bring with it an additional generative.

We have all been children. And not only mothers, but parents (biological, adoptive, social), not by biological destiny but by taking responsibility and re-elaborating a shared experience in cultural terms, acknowledging and, perhaps, recognising our childhood experience, can make us more generative, capable of looking after one another, both men and women, not by destiny but by choice. Whoever or whatever we have in mind or want to bring into the world and/or whoever or whatever we want to look after.

It is clear that this perspective requires a considerable cultural leap of faith precisely because it questions habits, customs and cultural choices given the form of ‘natural’ evidence and requires change and creativity to conceive of and bring to fruition. Because taking for granted, rigidity, routine, tendency to conform, stereotypes – all these are powerful obstacles to creative thinking and stop us imagining something new and different.

But in this case perhaps it is not a matter of inventing something truly new but rather of returning to, revisiting something far off but which has never fully disappeared, the Karstic river of gylany in which gender relationships are mutual and not hierarchical but can direct us towards a different evolution. Which does not seek specific female or male characteristics but emphasises the human beings we are. Traditional dichotomies (male competence/female warmth) can and must lose their meaning:

true competence cannot exist without warmth just as true warmth requires competence if it is to be transmitted and perceived. [...] The union between competence and warmth is neither female nor male. It is something which women can put forward strongly today given their historic legacy but it is something which has always been the defining characteristic of the wisdom and patrimony of enlightened individuals of both genders (Volpato 2013, 146).

Human qualities, then, not (solely) female ones. Then perhaps we will be able to create a fairer, more egalitarian and more welcoming world for new and different generations. Beginning with re-cognition and gratitude to those (men or women) whose care, not blood, not law, enabled us to exist, to be here.

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