

# FROM MOTHERHOOD TO THE SYMBOLIC ORDER OF THE MOTHER. FEMINIST ROUTES STARTING FROM “*THE UNDECIDABLE IMPRINT*”

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## A biological destiny

One of the issues that most occupied feminist reflection, beginning in the Seventies, is the relation with “the Mother”.

Motherhood was the subject of feminist interest also before the twentieth century: the first-wave feminism has often dealt with it. It identified maternity, as a kind of ‘biological destiny’ of the female gender, and in all that follows (care work, in the first place), a burden in the lives of women and an obstacle for achieving equality with respect to the male gender. Motherhood has been represented in this way for almost two centuries. At the end of the eighteenth century, Mary Wollstonecraft’s texts, dwells on laborious care activity that women put in place in private contexts (Wollstonecraft, 1792); in the nineteenth century, the works of Harriet Taylot and Stuart Mill, describe the invisible burden of caring for children whose mothers are burdened (Mill & Taylor, 1869); in the early decades of the twentieth century, Marxist feminist Aleksandra Kollontaj proposes a significant dismantling of maternal care, by women, through her socialization (that is to say through the entrusting of the children to public facilities) (Kollontaj, 1977).

This not so reassuring view of motherhood persists until the mid-twentieth century, for example, in Betty Friedan's stories: in *The Feminine Mystique*, she describes the lives of the young women of the American bourgeoisie, who live motherhood not as a choice, but rather as a social duty, and that often find themselves caged in a life of small daily comforts - fashionable appliances and small domestic entertainment - that alleviate the effort of care, but are certainly not able to compensate for loneliness and frustration (Friedan, 1963). Even Simone De Beauvoir, in the chapter dedicated to *La mère* in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, focuses on the danger of alienation that motherhood entails for a woman, questioning the concept of maternal instinct and focusing on the methods of birth-control and legal abortion, which, in the years she writes, began to spread in most western countries (De Beauvoir, 1949).

De Beauvoir describes the transformation that seems to be taking place: "C'est est la maternité que la femme accomplit intégralement son destin physiologique; c'est sa vocation "naturelle", puisque tout son organisme est orienté vers la perpétuation de l'espèce. Mais on a dit déjà que la société humaine n'est jamais abandonnée à la nature. Et en particulier depuis environ un siècle, la reproductive function n'est plus commandée par le seul hasard biologique, elle est contrôlée par des volontés" (De Beauvoir, 1949, p. 134).

The author underlines that, for the first time in history, sexuality/reproduction and maternity/care no longer seem inseparable. All this cannot leave the feminist *agenda* unchanged.

## The symbolic order of the mother

The critique of the sexuality/reproduction pair allows, in the first place, to focus on female sexuality. This requires a confrontation, often controversial, with the existing sexual imagery, conveyed not only by common sense, but even legitimized by the medical and social sciences.

Secondly, it allows to conceive motherhood in a new light. On the one hand, it can be interpreted through feminist values, or considered as a free and conscious existential choice (Chrodow, 1978).

On the other hand, reflection on motherhood can be accompanied by one on the figure of the mother, which becomes central in the debate of the second-wave feminism. In Italy, the theme is systematically introduced by Luisa Muraro in the book *L'Ordine*

*simbolico della madre*, to which the contribution of Ida Dominijanni *The Undecidable Imprint* (Dominijanni, 2018) is dedicated.

Considering the priority objective of its battles, the demolition of the patriarchal system of power, the second-wave feminism holds that the radical deconstruction of language is an obligatory path. The comparison with psychoanalysis is continuous, particularly with Lacanian theories. Starting from the insights of the Lacanian school psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray (Irigaray, 1974), the theoretical reflection focuses on the subsisting connection between language and sexual/existential domain, so stringent as to reduce, in fact, the space of thought and action for women. Julia Kristeva, in particular, distinguishes a symbolic order, which indicates the language of the father through which he conveys to the sons and daughters information on their respective roles, which therefore are inserted in the western phallogocentric tradition and a semiotic order of maternal and prelinguistic matrix, which affects the perception of the world and of time (a cyclic and monumental perception). Women, according to Kristeva, must make this semiotic order a symbolic language to give voice to the maternal stage (Oliver, 1993). Kristeva's reflection is developed in Italy by Luisa Muraro, who, as Dominijanni points out, reiterates the need for women to build a symbolic order, as a language and as a practice, based no longer on the law of the Father, but on the figure of the mother and on the mother-daughter relationship, disavowed and de-legitimized by all patriarchal narratives. Muraro writes: "Alla potenza materna è mancata, e ancora manca, nella cultura tradizionale, la genealogia femminile. Le è mancato, cioè, il modo appropriato di esprimersi ed esercitarsi, tanto che viene rappresentata, mostruosamente, nella forma della madre fallica" (Muraro, 1973, p. 70). The mother, according to Muraro, is the gateway to life and language, thus providing access to the symbolic. This thesis allows us to deny Oedipus' theorems and his symbolic castration, revealing their patriarchal character: the paternal figure, in the symbolic order of the mother, although present, is faded, reduced to a possibility among others and this allows to structure the access to the symbolic independently of the oedipal triangulation.

Muraro's thesis gave birth to a vast literature and has come to condition the feminist approach to his own battles.

Today, almost thirty years after the publication of his work, we can ask: what was the theoretical and political outcome of those reflections?

There is no doubt that the maternal genealogy helped illuminate a political repression. It has highlighted the ideological components of liberal democratic thought, questioning, for example, the categories of formal equality between the genres or the

autonomy of the law. He developed a critique of power and also of law, underlining their not-neutral nature. It provided the conditions for rethinking politics and rights in a gender perspective (Cavaliere, 2016, Chapter III). However, the maternal genealogy presented (and presents) also significant limits: the most relevant is probably the underestimation of the paternal figure. Together with the father, in the model proposed by Muraro, the love that his daughter feels for him and, above all, the mother's sexual desire for man, are ignored. The latter is as if cancelled, as if the procreative act were to represent the fading of female sexuality. Of course, this is not the desired outcome of feminist reflection, but the danger of this omission is political: that of falling back into the patriarchal scheme of the de-sexualized mother. If we want to avoid this risk - endorsing, in fact, as Dominijanni says, an already dominant and widely used scheme, by the media and even by political communication - the only possible way is to use the maternal figure not like an idealization. This means not reducing the proposal of a maternal symbolic order to an empty self-congratulatory rhetorical strategy. Rather, to assume the burden of it: to consider the maternal power - with all its ambiguities, even with its dark side - as a space for surplus, a place of resistance with respect to power, but also of transformation of reality.

Exactly as Luisa Muraro warned, at the end of her volume, still today: "occorre dare traduzione sociale alla potenza materna per impedire alla sintesi sociale di chiudersi e tenerla invece aperta a ogni poter dire" (Muraro, 1973, p. 105).

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