

## The Great Mother

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Translated by Sara Raimondi<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The piece analyses the relationship between nature and the maternal body that is found in archaic cultures. In the mythical and artistic figures of women displaying their pregnant features, ancient cultures captured the unique bond between the body of the mother and *physis*, or nature, which, in the act of giving birth – to other human beings and to the fruits of nature respectively – partake in the same principle of generativity. The philosophical tradition later inaugurated by Plato and Aristotle, however, has erased the maternal body and the link to procreation from its understanding of nature, and rather put an emphasis on the eternal regeneration of the species. This movement of abstraction from the materiality of the body has eventually been transposed to the realm of *logos* and of immortal ideas, via the metaphor of the labour of thought. By engaging with a range of diverse references such as the aforementioned classical thinkers, Hannah Arendt, and more recent anthropological studies around archaic matriarchal societies, the piece calls for a more generous reading of the role of the maternal body in relation to *physis*: this more capacious approach would not only enable to positively rethink the theme of maternity within the feminist imaginary, but also to recuperate a conception of nature as a generating force which encompasses all the living, human and non-human, in a single cosmos.

*Keywords: maternal body, birth, physis, Arendt, Plato, Aristotle, matriarchal societies, Gimbutas*

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## Biography

Adriana Cavarero is Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Verona. She is recognised for her contributions to feminist studies and political theory; her works on Hannah Arendt; the re-reading of classical thought from a feminist perspective, and her studies on narrative, speech, political discourse, and violence. In her academic career, Cavarero has also held visiting appointments at UC Berkeley, UC Santa Barbara, NYU, and Harvard University.

Cavarero's major works include *In Spite of Plato* (1995), *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (2000), *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (2008), *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (2016), *Surging Democracy: Notes on Hannah Arendt's Political Thought* (2021).

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The god of *zoe* was the only one among the gods who came into the world as an embryo, as a being whose first movement in the womb was the most direct manifestation of life, something which only women can experience.  
(Kerenyi, *Dionysos*)

In the churches and walls of Ireland and elsewhere in Europe, we often find the image of a crouched female body who keeps her gigantic vagina open with her own hands in display. Her name is Sheele-na-gig (Rohades, 2010), and she is a symbol of procreative power in pre-Christian cults. The newborn comes into the world through the mother's body, which opens itself up to give birth to another body, another singular living being that has dwelt and has grown in her womb, and that now comes into the world through her vagina. The figures of women showing their vulva is common in archaic cultures. For instance, in Ancient Greece, we find Baubo, a woman portrayed with her gown lifted in the act of showing her pregnant body and genitals, who is connected to the myth of Demeter and of Mother Earth. Friedrich Nietzsche defines Baubo as the female double of Dionysus in the "Eleusian mysteries, [where] the

female sexual organ is exalted as the symbol of fertility and a guarantee of the regeneration and eternal return of all things” (Kofman, 1988: 197). However, it is not only in Ancient Greece that we find a link between the mother’s body and the natural cycle of regeneration, the cycle of *physis*, or, to use Karl Kerényi’s words, the endless cycle of the eternal and indestructible life named *zoe* (1996: 80–2). Sculptures and ritual statuettes of women showing their womb and breasts – which appear to be deliberately portrayed as disproportionate in comparison to the rest of the body – are found everywhere in the archaic world as a symbol of the fecundity of the female body, which itself symbolises the fecundity of nature embodied by Mother Goddess, or Mother Earth: a primigenial deity that is variously named as Rea, Cybele, Inanna, Ishtar, and Astarte, among other names. However, the disproportionate open vagina of Sheele-na-gig carries a specific meaning, and thus, becomes hyper-visible when compared to the size of the breasts and the womb found in other artefacts. More than female fecundity and procreation, it is the very act of giving birth that is foregrounded in Sheele-na-gig, that is, the very fact that a living body rips and opens itself up to give birth to another living being, and then continues to proudly exhibit this rupture and opening after the act, *post partum*, so to speak. Even Mother Earth, which folds and cracks to generate the flower buds, partakes in this experience of giving birth, in its act of opening itself to release its fruit. It is no coincidence that both the Greek word *physis* and its Latin equivalent *natura* derive from verbs meaning “being born” (*phuo*, *nascor*). What is at stake in nature is the process of generation and procreation; correspondingly, what is at stake in viviparous animals – the class to which the human species belongs – is the very act of birth. To put it rather drastically, nature itself is named after those who are born from the maternal body, that is, after those that are born through the vagina. It is thus hardly surprising that figures which display large vaginas and that celebrate the generative power of the female body with their large wombs and breasts are so common in the worlds of archaic art and culture. The complicity between women and nature is established through birth, in an event that actualises and accomplishes the very principle of generativity.

“*Deinon to tiktein estin*” – “giving birth is terrible [*tremendo*], incomprehensible” – says Clytemnestra in Sophocles’ *Electra* (2001: 20, 79)<sup>2</sup>. Those who are familiar with Greek literature cannot overlook the centrality of the word *deinon*, whose semantic weight is notoriously impossible to translate in modern languages. Even the term “terrible” grasps it only inadequately:<sup>3</sup> a better translation is “uncanny”. Birth is defined as “uncanny” since it generates a feeling of awe and wonder which surpasses fear. Whilst women’s act of giving birth is a familiar fact, it still provokes astonishment. If we linger a little longer on the etymological analysis, it is worth noting that the Greek verb *tiktein*, giving birth [*partorire*], literally translates into “giving birth to offspring” [*figliare*], as we find also in the word *tokos*, which can take the meaning of both “offspring”, and that of “birth” or “fruit” (Plato, *Rep.*: 507a; see also Benveniste, 2016: 147). There is something uncanny in the act of giving birth and procreating as it is experienced by the singular body, which during birth is overwhelmed by the productive power of *physis*, and becomes itself part of the generative power of nature, almost as if it was determined, possessed by it, under the effect of nature’s intrinsic laws. If nature embodies the proliferation of living beings, the birth of new lives and a generative process which is general and at the same time always singular, it is in the more specific act of giving birth that the human body, and the mother’s body in particular, realises its contact with nature, and uncannily so. Or, put differently, with birth, the body itself fuses with nature, and thus becomes the junction – material, animal, consciously alive and vigilant, if dispossessed – of the generative process of Mother Earth. The latter is the earthly force which in the organic world manifests itself in the birth of every being, and prepares the pregnant bodies for the act of giving birth. Not all women become mothers, nor are they bound to do so, as the Greek myth reminds us with its figures of proud and powerful virgins like Athena, Artemis and Hestia.

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<sup>2</sup> Taking some liberties but hitting the mark, Virginia Woolf (2018) translates: “There is a strange power in maternity”.

<sup>3</sup> This has been adjusted from the original, where it reads: “Even the Italian ‘*tremendo*’ grasps it only inadequately”. The translator follows Anna Carson’s translation in Sophocles, *Electra*, which renders the term as “terrible, incomprehensible” in English (*translator’s note*).

However, only the female body can give birth. Ultimately, nature, which in the human language is specifically intended to evoke birth in its very name, depends on the body that opens itself up during birth.

Hannah Arendt makes reference to this very openness of the body in an interesting comment that may appear surprising, if it is read in the context of her wider thought. Although Arendt contemplates the Greek concept of *physis* at several points in her *oeuvre* – and although she identifies natality as the very foundational category of her political theory – she remains remarkably indifferent to the theme of maternity. However, we find an unexpected exception to her reticence around this theme in a short discussion of pride in her *Denktagebuch*.

*Superbia* (pride) – Arendt writes, using the Latin word – must be distinguished from *hubris*, since it refers exclusively to the body. *Superbia* “concerns the integrity of the person [...] [the latter] is essentially corporeal” (Arendt, 2003: 330–1). As Arendt continues in another entry from the same notebook, “the *superbia* of remaining intact” (*ibid.*: 525) finds a paradigmatic example in the figure of Achilles, who proudly exhibits a corporeal integrity which reflects his extraordinary state of invulnerability. The Greek hero, however, expresses his pride only as an excess, the same excess that leads him to drag Hector’s body onto the battlefield and shred it into pieces. In fact, *superbia* does not belong to Achilles alone, but pertains to all men as males. It is a type of pride in one’s own physical integrity that, as Arendt explains, bears a wider meaning because “it is actually specifically masculine [...]. The body of the woman is by nature unable to remain intact; its law is the rift of copulation and birth. Hence *superbia* is actually ‘masculine’” (*ibid.*)<sup>4</sup>.

Even in its brevity, Arendt’s argument clearly highlights the specificity of the female body, which is naturally prone to the “rift” and to the rupture, that is, to the opening experienced when giving birth. As many of her readers point out – and not to run into a premature excitement – it is good to remember that, for Arendt, not only is the bodily dimension of life merely

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<sup>4</sup> On this topic and for a deepening of the question of the biological understanding of the body in Arendt, see Liesbeth Schoonheim (2019).

biological; the very biological realm, that is, the organic life of *zoe*, is governed by the order of *necessity*, and clashes with the *freedom* that pertains to the sphere of action. This contrast, which is pivotal to an understanding of Arendt's political thought, is further restated in the aforementioned reference to pride, where Arendt highlights that everything which concerns the body escapes our capacity to determine it. What pertains to the realm of *physis* falls beyond our control. Arendt never ceases to remind us that the life we hold as living beings, as bodies, is governed by the inescapable laws of nature, which work independently from us and escape our will. In our bodily existence, we find ourselves in the realm of necessity, not that of freedom. To put it in the language of Arendt, we are in the realm of the biological life of *zoe*, and not of *bios*, which instead pertains to unique beings as capable of action (Arendt, 1963: 76). The pride in the body which maintains its integrity is "essentially physical" precisely because the very corporeality of the body is *physis*, organic life, *zoe*. The female body cannot perform pride, since "its law is the rift of copulation and birth"; as such, it sits in the realm of necessity that pertains to corporeality. In fact, it belongs to it even more than the male body does, and undoubtedly so.

Arendt argues that, while the male body can rest in the certainty of its invulnerability, and proudly picture itself in its integrity, the female body, which is by nature – that is, by the very law of *physis* – fit to the rift of copulation and birth (*der Riss der Begattung und der Geburt*),<sup>5</sup> cannot take pride in the integrity of the body. On the one hand, this statement might appear very sensitive, since copulation, by implying the rupture of the hymen, if not the very act of penetration, risks establishing a constitutive violability of the female body. On the other hand, however, it also raises important points for reflection. By connecting copulation with birth, Arendt does not refer to the female body in general but more specifically to the body of the mother, that is, the body whose "rupture", whose tearing and rifting every human being is born from. No-one of us would be in the world – or, as Arendt would have it, would have *appeared* into the world – if a woman's body had not experienced a

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted from the notebooks in German (Arendt, 2003: 330–1).

“rupture” in the act of giving birth, as part of the natural cycle of regeneration, that is, of the necessity of organic life. Whilst Achilles’s body can metaphorically swell with pride at its integrity, and could even claim that this integrity glimmers in beauty, the mother’s body is an open, ruptured body, and it literally swells and opens itself up in order to bring other bodies into the world. After all, are the archaic female figures that display their vagina not the symbol of this rupture? Is it not the very necessity of *physis* that is there on display? Is there any pride for the ruptured female body? Unfortunately, Arendt does not pursue this kind of questions. And perhaps she cannot pursue them, since the *physis* she focuses on has now abandoned the realm of myth and has crystallised in a pure philosophical concept.

In order to argue that the corporeal realm, and nature more generally, belong to the order of necessity, Arendt draws on the concept of *physis* that we find in the great Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. Whilst the word *physis* carries many meanings, Aristotle strives to define it with his usual precision. As he writes in *Metaphysics*, in one of its main meanings, *physis* is “the production of things that grow” (*ton phyomenon genesis*), that is, the process of birth and growth that is common to all living beings, both in their multiplicity and in their individuality. For “living is the being of living things” (Aristotle, *DA*: 415b). And for the individual living being, it is crucially so only for a delimited period of time. Similar to other animals and plants, each human being is, exists, and lives in the span of time that runs between its birth and its death. Each singular being *is* while it is alive, and thus only for a limited time. *Physis*, as the process of birth and growth which is common to all living beings, also includes death in its meaning. And it is precisely on the contrast between the perpetual regeneration of *physis* and the mortality of the individual being that the philosophical gaze is now focused.

The latter is a crucial distinction that marks the difference between the being-forever of nature and the being-for-a-limited-time that pertains to living beings. Only the individual living being, in its mortal state, is bound to the unfortunate destiny of existing just for a limited time. *Physis*, on the contrary, is forever. *Physis*, by encompassing the multiplicity of all living

beings, is the eternal process of birth and growth which constantly regenerates itself. Its etymology is thus confirmed: birth by way of new births, proliferation of living, regeneration. As Arendt highlights, building on Aristotle to a certain extent, living beings also partake in the being-forever of nature: their “being-forever corresponds to *aeigenes*, procreation” (Arendt, 1961: 42). By procreating, living beings, which are themselves mortal in their singularity, enable the continuous regeneration of nature. Thanks to procreation, and “through the recurrent cycle of life, nature assures the same kind of being-forever to things that are born and die as to things that are and do not change” (*ibid.*). For viviparous animals, to which humans belong, the pregnant body of the mother should then appear as an essential component of the ever-generative process of *physis*. In all truth, Aristotle’s concern, like Plato’s before him, is rather directed to the fact that through procreation, human beings propagate themselves as a species. It is the human species, like any other species of living beings, animal or vegetal, that realises the forever-being that pertains to nature. Even if the individual being is mortal, the species becomes immortal. Plato was so invested in this argument that he transposed the immortality of the species enabled by procreation to the much nobler realm of immortal ideas, which are themselves generated by the soul after the required philosophical labour.

“All human beings are pregnant, Socrates, in body and in soul, and when we reach maturity it is natural that we desire to give birth”, we read in Plato’s *Symposium* (206c). Pregnancy, procreation, giving birth: even in the Greek text, the language is deliberately technical, and refers to the sphere of the maternal body which generates the new born, new bodies. If we leave aside the question of the soul for a moment, as far as the body is concerned, Plato’s sentence would better be read as “some women”, instead of “all human beings” (*pantes anthropoi*). As we can draw from the wider context of the argument, with the reference to “all human beings”, Plato wishes here to indicate the totality of human beings as a species. Not dissimilarly to other animal species, humankind propagates through the birth of new living beings which perpetuate the species and, crucially, for Plato, make it immortal. If “mortal nature seeks as far as it can to exist for ever and to be immortal”, this is accomplished

by means of continual generation (*geneset*), “the process by which it always leaves behind another new thing to replace the old” (*ibid.*: 207d). Plato acknowledges that something divine is present in the processes of pregnancy and procreation: “it is an aspect of immortality in the otherwise mortal creature” (*ibid.*: 206d). Since we are bodies, we are mortal, however, through the birth of new generations, the species becomes immortal. It is precisely this immortality of the species or, we can say, of “all human beings”, that is of interest to Plato. His emphasis is put on the fact that, whilst they generate bodies that are mortal, pregnancy and procreation perpetuate the species.

The fundamental thesis that Plato wishes to put forth here is bold but rather simple. It is built on the analogy between the acts of pregnancy and procreation via the mother’s body on the one hand, and those performed by the philosophical soul on the other: whilst the mother’s body generates mortal bodies that yet render the species immortal, the philosophical soul, which is itself already immortal, generates ideas, discourses, *logoi*; in virtue of their being true, the latter are not only immortal, but also eternal. It is well known that, in a passage from *Theaetetus*, Plato describes Socrates’s philosophising as a maieutics (Plato, *Theaet.*: 149a–151d). As the son of a midwife himself, Socrates helps generate – if amongst the unavoidable sufferings – the ideas around the beautiful and the right of which the souls of his interlocutors are pregnant. With different formulations, this analogy is certainly common in Plato’s work, and, as such, the passage in the *Symposium* is not an exception. However, what is exceptional is that, in this specific passage, the analogy is articulated with a great wealth of detail through the use of the technical language of pregnancy and procreation, and yet, without either the mother or the maternal body ever being mentioned. Even though we are aware – as Plato is – that the maternal body lies at the centre of this scene, no reference to it can be made. Even if we witness a maternal body that swells up and gives birth, the reference to its sex cannot be proffered. There is, however, an important note that must be raised: in the fiction of the dialogue, Socrates is the one who speaks, recording a speech from Diotima, the minister of Mantinea, whom Socrates had heard in his youth, and whose words he is now repeating. Thus, in the passage, Plato stages a very

sophisticated ventriloquial game. In the texts, a woman's voice – mediated by Socrates' words, which express Plato's ideas – proffers a speech that celebrates and emulates, and at the same time diminishes and erases, the maternal body. This is an argumentative device that, whilst drawing from the female experience of pregnancy and procreation, not only aims to show the superiority of philosophy in “giving birth through the soul” over “giving birth through the body”. The speech also excludes the very protagonist of the act of giving birth. We could talk about a mimetic appropriation of the act of procreation by means of degradation and erasure, if not through a symbolic matricide.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the abundance of the technical language around birth and pregnancy in the text renders the erasure of the mother's body so extreme as to almost make it unbelievable.

“All human beings are pregnant (*kuousin*) in body and in soul, and procreate (*gegontai*) when they reach maturity, because our nature itself (*physis*) strives to give birth (*tiktin*)”, utters Socrates, recording the speech from Diotima. These are technical terms that frequently return in the following argument. More specifically, the Greek verb *kuoin* captures the swelling of the pregnant womb and, by extension, the increased volume of the body.<sup>7</sup> The meaning of the term *gignomai* on the other hand is wider, since it points to the act of procreation that applies to nature generally, and to the world of living animals and the vegetal in particular. *Tiktein*, finally, returns to the specific language of “procreating”, which again foregrounds the act of giving birth. It is perhaps worth mentioning that, in Latin, the words for giving birth (*partum*) and part (*pars*) share the same root, and they both refer to a part, a portion that is separated from the whole of the unit to which it belongs. Philologically, the technical language used by Plato is thus very realistic. It describes a body whose womb becomes swollen and opens up in order to give birth to that *part of itself* which is the body of the newborn. The reference here is obviously the female body. Plato seems to suggest that it is precisely the maternal body that “generates” the immortality of the species, but does not say it

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<sup>6</sup> I developed this topic in *In Spite of Plato* (Cavarero, 1995: 91–120).

<sup>7</sup> See the comparison with Benveniste (2016: 457).

explicitly. The complicity between the mother's body and *physis* cannot be spoken about. In fact, even the famous *chora* found in the *Timaeus* – a sort of mother/matter that, Plato suggests, cannot be defined or conceptualised due to its shapelessness – resides in the darkest corner of the cosmogonic analysis, and Plato calls it a “receptacle” or a “nurse” (Plato, *Tim.*: 49a, 50a). Ultimately, the *physis* of the philosophers is a *physis* that “likes to conceal” its origin in the maternal body, from which it derives its very name.

As is evident, the renowned shift from myth to *logos*, which is the object of concern of many studies on ancient Greece, is a shift that also points to two different understandings of nature. One is the archaic understanding of *physis* focused on the worship of the Great Mother and the mother's body, represented as swollen and open, and manifesting nature's generative power. The other meaning is the philosophical conception of the natural process of the reproduction of the species, whereby the reproductive capacity of the mother's body has an instrumental function, and thus loses its centrality. In his biological studies, Aristotle looks at the female body with scientific detachment: he reduces the womb to a mere container that nurtures the male sperm, which impregnates it with the embryo of the newborn, and as such, already exists in its wholeness, so to speak. The removal of the mother's body from the acts of gestation and birth that we find in the *Symposium* is, on the other hand, so surprising that it suggests that Plato's philosophy had not yet come to terms with the archetype of the Great Mother. As such, Baubo and the other female figures who show their open vagina appear only as a hidden trace in the texture of Plato's *logos*, and invite derision and mockery, rather than laughter – as one version of the myth would have it.

Whilst it is appealing to think of an original matriarchal system which was then defeated and supplanted by the patriarchal society, such a hypothesis can only partially explain the disinterest that philosophy displays towards the theme of birth from the maternal body. And in fact, the multi-layered universe of the myth – which already absorbs the story of the defeat of matriarchy – speaks not so much of an archaic society led by women, or of an ancient matriarchal lineage, but of the worship of the Goddess Mother that exalts the mother's body as

a symbol of fecundity and regeneration. This tradition is attested not only by the figures of the women with swollen wombs and breasts displaying their genitals, but also in a series of stories which were eventually translated from the world of myth to that of tragedy and which, in the attempt to portray the unique bond between the maternal body and *physis*, evoke some disquieting images of hyper-maternity. One example is the proud figure of Niobe, who praises herself for giving birth to seven girls and seven boys; or the multitudes of the Bacchantes, who, after being possessed by Dionysus, return to the wilderness to feed the young deer and wolves. Not to speak of the incredible power of Demeter who, hurt by the kidnapping of her daughter, halts the very regeneration of nature. There is indeed an excess in these figures of mythical mothers, whereby the abundance of their maternity becomes hyper-maternity, something that is natural, but that, precisely because it is natural, also becomes uncanny in the intersecting of birth and *physis*, of reproduction and *zoe*, which is unique to the maternal body. In fact, this overabundance is found in the very figures of Sheele-na-gig, who keep their gigantic vaginas open with their own hands.

Around the mid-1800s, Johann Jakob Bachofen formulated the thesis of the original matriarchate, understood as a stage of evolution of human history, which was then revisited by James Frazer in the first decades of the 1900s (Bachofen, 2008).<sup>8</sup> The thesis has consequently gone through different stages of appraisal in modern scientific studies, until it reached a stalemate and risked disappearing completely. In such a journey, the very term “matriarchate” has been used less as a technical term and more as a shorthand catchword for the multiple cultural models that are variously defined as gynocratic, matrilinear, matrifocal or matricentric, in academic language. For instance, the culture of the “Old Europe”, illustrated by the Lithuanian archaeologist and linguist Marija Gimbutas, is defined as “matristic”. Gimbutas’s innovative work

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, Bachofen speaks of *Muttherrecht*: the right of the mothers; whilst Frazer calls “matriarchate the social system in which lineage and inheritance are established only through the mother” (Frazer, 2014: 27, *our translation*).

had the merit of reviving interest in the theme of the matriarchate, and was met with great popular success in the 1970s and 1980s. Since 1974, Gimbutas had published a series of books on the cult of the Great Goddess in the neolithic age in Europe based on archaeological findings, amongst which the small statuettes of pregnant women bear particular significance (Gimbutas, 1974; 1989). Without going into the details of a complex research – which is enriched by a multidisciplinary approach that mixes myth and folklore – Gimbutas’s core thesis claims that, from 7000 to 3500 B.C., human settlements found in what she calls the “Old Europe”, a world of villages distributed between the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean, were characterised by a matricentric culture in which female goddesses were worshipped as symbols of the natural cycle of birth, death and regeneration. This was a peaceful, egalitarian and artistically sophisticated society, which functioned in harmony with nature; the latter was itself understood primarily in terms of fecundity and interconnectedness amongst all living beings, including animals and vegetal. Gimbutas argues that, after multiple raids of hordes of men coming from the Northern steppes, this civilisation was destroyed and replaced by Indo-European peoples, whose culture was dominated by male figures and displayed aggressive characteristics, a hierarchical organisation, and a tendency to worship heroes over the vital cycle of life. Gimbutas points out that, at a certain stage, crucially, swords start to replace the statuettes of pregnant women amongst the findings of archaeological excavations: weapons replace the “thousands of statuettes which, due to the disproportionate sizes of their buttocks, were defined as ‘neolithic Venuses’ or ‘steatopygiae’, and which were preserved and revered on domestic shrines and in other places of worship” (Trevi, 2012).<sup>9</sup>

The work of Gimbutas is interesting not only for its contents, but also because of the peculiar circumstances of its

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<sup>9</sup> The quotation is taken from a timely and endorsing review by Emanuele Trevi (“The equal opportunities of Prehistory” [“Le pari opportunità nella preistoria”], published in *La lettura*, 19 agosto 2012) of the Italian translation of Marija Gimbutas’s book *The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe* (1991).

reception. Gimbutas's work has been aggressively criticised by the academic community, which quickly reacted by making Gimbutas the "black sheep" of the discipline, and still rejects her thesis; her name soon disappeared from university courses and bibliographical collections, almost as though a sort of "academic veto" removed her from the scene (Spretnak, 2011). On the other hand, though, the author has received extraordinary popular acclaim, and she has been welcomed with enthusiasm by a large set of feminist studies in various spiritual, artistic, and ecological branches, which have been considerably influenced by Gimbutas's writings (Leslie, 1989). Even here, though, things have not gone entirely smoothly. A critical position soon emerged within feminist studies that has not only questioned the scientific accuracy of Gimbutas's theory; above all, it has objected that her thesis could be deployed to ideologically support the liberating aims and strategies pursued by contemporary feminism (see Tringham and Margaret, 1998).<sup>10</sup> Do we really need mother-goddesses? Is it really useful to continue to identify women with maternity – a move which itself supports the patriarchal imaginary? Have we not had enough of thinking of motherhood as a necessary biological destiny? By celebrating women's reproductive power, do we want to once again relegate women to the enclosure of the domestic sphere? These are key questions which cannot be underestimated since, besides their specific application to the issue of matriarchy, they risk impacting on the scope of feminist research, by restricting its horizon as under the effect of a veto. Ultimately, the main veto concerns the theme of maternity and the legitimacy of any research that tries to rethink it positively or, in fact, in true *feminist* terms. As Fanny Söderbäck rightly points out, since Simone de Beauvoir's critique of patriarchy as a system that reduces women to mothers and confines them to the realm of reproduction, "feminists have been wrestling with the question of whether birth and motherhood pose a threat to or promote women's liberation" (Söderbäck, 2019: 186). Women's "troubling for

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<sup>10</sup> Exemplary amongst the feminist critiques of Gimbutas is the title of Cynthia Eller's book, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past will not Give Women a Future* (2000).

making other bodies”, to use a very effective expression of Donna Haraway (1991: 253), risks imprisoning them in the trap of reproducing the species, that is, in a biological function that turns into a normative dispositive. It follows that any discussion on procreation becomes immediately suspicious, if not dangerous and, in all cases, politically wrong, and even more so if it focuses on the mother’s body – such as we find in the works of Kristeva and Irigaray, which Söderbäck rereads very poignantly. It is as if giving birth, or the reproductive function to which women have been relegated by the patriarchal tradition, traps us in a new epistemological straitjacket of feminist making from which we cannot escape. Or as if mentioning the mother’s body, from which we were born, and perhaps reflecting on its symbolical force, were counterproductive to the free construction of feminist subjectivity. The situation is undoubtedly very complex, and deserves attention due to the censorship that it can produce. Any discussion that, in spite of Plato, tries to foreground the figure of the mother and to highlight its power, or to describe its unique experience, cannot but confront itself with this veto, which itself works as a dispositive to enforce conformity, or as a mere invitation to silence. The matter becomes even more difficult when the object of investigation is not so much motherhood more generally, or the matriarchate system that can be inspired by it, but rather the mother’s body itself, and the act of procreating and giving birth, that is, the biological substance that brings us close to the animal, a living flesh that becomes swollen and opens up, a womb.

Recently, in a scientifically ambitious and remarkably original book entitled *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, the anthropologist David Graeber and the archaeologist David Wengrow have rescued Marija Gimbutas’s work from academic oblivion, and from the vetoes and posthumous vilification that weighed upon her, and not only within feminist circles (2021: 222 and after). Gimbutas’s thesis on matriarchy – understood as the culture and social organisation built around the model of the mother – has found an unexpected reassessment. More specifically, the authors of this “new history of humanity” shows several pieces of archaeological evidence – which is strengthened by the now

available analysis of ancient DNA – of the link between the biodiversity pertaining to the ecology of the neolithic era, where we find proof of the first crops and of the pharmacological use of herbs, and the ritual figures of the pregnant female body. Further evidence, the authors argue, reveals a contrast between a cultural scheme whereby artistic and ritual expressions are organised around the theme of a “predatory male violence” (*ibid.*: 252), and a cultural scheme centred instead on the “science of the concrete” and on female symbolism. Going into more detail, according to the authors, contrary to the male model that celebrates heroic warriors and relies on hierarchical organisations, the female model is instead characterised by examples of egalitarianism, and does not show signs of “major violent conflict” (*ibid.*: 248). This not only confirms the “sweeping historical argument” (*ibid.*: 224) of Gimbutas, by reassessing its scientific accuracy, but would also seem to reinforce the claim that the famous war-driven Amazons found in the myth are a later invention of a patriarchal mentality. Conversely, the representation of the female body as a hyper-motherhood is rather the trace of a cultural tradition that understands power not as conflict and violent subjugation, but rather as the event, most familiar and yet extraordinary – and, thus, uncanny, *deinon* – of procreation, that is, of the regeneration of *physis* itself through the human beings who are born from the woman’s body.

In fact, this means not only to admit that, in human history, or in its primordial steps, if we like, there was a cultural scheme defined by a type of egalitarian and non-violent organisation in which women played an important role. From the perspective of the history of philosophy, it also means recording the presence of a conception of nature understood as birth, as a generating force which encompasses all the living, human and non-human, and which, in ancient times, was not yet invested with an anthropocentric tone. In this, Arendt’s insistence upon the order of necessity that pertains to *physis*, which appears to elude human control, is illuminating, Arendt perfectly captures the philosophical interest in the primacy of the human world in its various political, ethical, and aesthetical expressions and so on, in conjunction with the realisation that there is a natural world to which we belong as living beings

along with other living beings – we could say, a world of *zoe* – which escapes our will and, crucially, our undisputed control. What Arendt calls the *necessity* of nature, the biological knot that ties all bodies, linking every thing to another, living or not living, within a net of uninterrupted regeneration, is perceived more as an object of wonder and worship, and less as an obstacle to human freedom in the archaic era. And it is precisely this necessity, which manifests itself as an entanglement of all the living in a single cosmos, or in a single planet – as today’s environmentalists would put it – that the mother’s body accomplishes, humanely, in her own flesh. It is as if, starting precisely from the mother’s body, and perhaps following the traces of its archaic celebration, we could finally bring ourselves to conceive of the human condition in terms of a materialist bio-ontology – or better, zoontology – which strives to free the plurality of the living from the anthropocentric grip that traps it in its predatory web.

Of course, the archaic realm is not a receptacle of truth. It does not merely hide truths that can eventually be disclosed. If anything, it suggests possibilities of interpreting our being part of the world, living among the living, on which we could reflect in order to make room for a biocentric perspective that dares to venture into a radical ecology.

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