

The Archetype of the Great Mother and Maternal Societies: The Code of Emotions and Affections

Paola Di Nicola^a

Abstract

This article aims to analyse the social imaginary of the post-industrial society. Its starting point is Gilbert Durand's concept of the social imaginary, supposedly far more influenced by the Nocturnal Order (with feminine connotations) than the Diurnal Order (predominantly masculine). The article suggests that the social imaginary which took shape in affluent societies in the 1960s and 1970s, partly as a result of widespread mechanisms of redistribution, was dominated by maternal symbols encouraging values of inclusion, equality, freedom, and self-fulfilment. With the transition to an increasingly technocratic and competitive society, these positive symbols slowly shifted towards an all-encompassing maternal form, creating dependency, passivity, a decline in civic engagement, and consumerism. This is a sign of the resurgence of the Nocturnal Order with its silent forms of social control, favoured by widespread forms of addiction and the drive for self-realisation in the consumer world.

Keywords: archetype of the Great Mother, social imaginary, consumer society.

1. The archetype of the Great Mother

An archetype is a product of human thought, a social construct providing foundations for the symbols, myths, rituals, and narratives in the dominant social imaginary. It is a symbolic construction which has always given meaning to existence and human frailty, of which people are aware (unlike other animals). Birth, life, and death are phases in a biological cycle which can only be understood and accepted as part of a symbolic dimension of meaning. At the same time, people have always attempted to answer existential queries about their origins, their role in society, and what happens after death, perhaps not

^a Prof.ssa Emerita, University of Verona, Verona, Italy, Editor in Chief of Italian Sociological Review.

Corresponding author:
Paola Di Nicola
E-mail: paola.dinicola@univr.it

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scientifically but by attributing meaning. The responses offered through science in Western societies over the last two centuries have actively ostracised the symbols, myths, rituals, and narratives which played an efficient and effective role for thousands of years. These common-sense explanations are now embraced by certain social groups and entire populations all around the world. Before scientific knowledge took hold, narratives seemed to draw on a collective heritage rooted in the human body to some degree. This collective memory was stimulated and fuelled by emotions, passions, and fears with specific cultural narrative features anchored in different socio-economic and environmental contexts. Although the exact form differed, some aspects were invariable: funeral and birth rituals, for example, as well as the feeling of being descendants of a transcendent entity, a sensation of oneness with nature, perception of the sacred, and fear of the unknown. This ties in with Jung's notion of the collective unconscious.

It can be claimed that all this was swept aside by the Age of Reason. Indeed, even Jung was concerned about the dwindling significance of human symbols, myths, and rituals in his society. He maintained that people had found ready-made answers in Christian rituals, symbols, and dogma during the centuries of religious dominance. As these answers had to be accepted and could not be questioned (on pain of accusations of heresy and sin), the sense and significance of symbols and rituals suffered as a result.

Yet, the twentieth century produced symbols, rituals, myths, and narratives to unite humanity, guide behaviour, and help to give a sense to life: myths about progress, universal problem-solving techniques, money, the earth, nature as a great Mother with inexhaustible regenerating resources, heroes sacrificing themselves for their homeland (lest we forget, there were two world wars in the twentieth century), racial superiority, and success. More recent myths have focused on self-fulfilment and self-determination, immortality, eternal youth, the body as personal property (Le Breton, 2021), and the myth of happiness. Such myths have produced and in turn been generated by narratives still rooted in an ancient collective unconscious, providing answers to age-old questions about who we are, where we come from, where we go when we die, and the meaning of our current existence.

The Great Mother first became a topic of debate after the publication of Bachofen's epic *Mother Right*.¹ This controversial work was criticised, or sometimes rejected outright, by the emerging discipline of anthropology for attempting to demonstrate that societies in the distant past were characterised by a female code that subsequently faded and/or was eradicated. Fellow

¹Bachofen (1988) for an overview of the debate triggered by the publication of the work, see Di Nicola (2024), in part. Chap.1.

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scholars at the time accused Bachofen of working exclusively with material from myths and legends of dubious authenticity, the legacy of past narratives rendered ineffective by the Enlightenment. Such material was deemed appropriate for scholars of antiquity with their academic curiosity and art historians because of the role myths played in creating the characteristic works of so-called classicism. Standing in contrast to Bachofen's working methods was the burgeoning field of scientific (empirically based) anthropology, whose field studies unearthed no evidence of the matriarchy. The identification of many matrilineal societies was initially dismissed as a largely insignificant oddity but went on to become a field of study which reinforced the patriarchal labelling of ancient and primordial societies. It was established beyond doubt that a matriarchy in the terms suggested by Bachofen had never existed. Furthermore, the importance of the maternal line in determining hereditary descent and community affiliation was found to have been unrelated to the power or authority of mothers, with maternal uncles assuming a paternal role for their nephews and nieces².

Nevertheless, a large number of pregnant female figurines were found during further anthropological and archaeological research, above all in Europe and Asia Minor. With prominent lactating breasts and holding fruits of the earth, these statuettes were dated to 5000-4000 BCE. In the age of the great Mediterranean civilisations, crude female-shaped artifacts became goddesses in myths: the protectors of fertility, soil and crops, wealth, creation, and childbirth. Attributed with names, these female divinities were worshipped with their own special rituals. They often had a double-edged character as they gave life but could also take it away. Indeed, although these good-hearted nurturing

²Without claiming to refute what anthropology has demonstrated about the non-existence of the matriarchy, it is worth citing a study by Francesco Remotti about the political structures of pre-colonial and sub-Saharan Africa. Remotti pointed out that the Lobedu people of the Transvaal differ significantly from other kingdoms in southern Africa since they have no army and are ruled by a queen. Before the kingdom was entrusted to a female monarch in the early nineteenth century, there was a high level of internal and external conflict. The beginning of the queen's reign saw the introduction of mechanisms for resolving internal conflict through mediation. Furthermore, the fact that the queen had the power to influence rainfall and other natural phenomena became a source of fear and respect in communities outside the kingdom: they feared that the queen might send calamities upon them: "It was precisely these magical powers of the Lobedu queen that served as a form of protection against the more aggressive neighbouring peoples. In this way, the Lobedu kingdom became unlike any other kingdom, even in the eyes of its neighbours: it was not belligerent but was feared"; Remotti, F. (1984), *Centri, Capitali, Città. Un'esplorazione nelle strutture politiche dell'Africa pre-coloniale e sub-sahariana*, Giappichelli, Torino: 82-91.

protectors received prayers and requests for intercession to save lives both individually and collectively, they could also be threatening and fearsome when defied or betrayed.

In the collective imaginary of the time when these numinous figures were venerated, they took on the form of the female body, epitomising the three initial phases of life: fertilisation, foetal development, and childbirth, but also the path of life and death, with a symbolic return to the belly of the earth. To this end, Marija Gimbutas (2010, 2020) referred to settled ‘matrifocal’ societies based on agriculture in north-eastern Europe. However, the symbolic feminine world of these societies has nothing to do with female political power.

The annual cycle of germination, growth, and harvest held both mystery and material sustenance for early farmers. These ancient agriculturalists must have recognized the analogy between grain seeds germinating in the field and new life growing in the womb, for the representation of this analogy is found in many Old European sites. The pregnant vegetation goddess (she is popularly known as the earth goddess or Mother Earth) was one of the most-represented female figures depicted in Neolithic Old Europe. Hundreds of pregnant goddess figurines have been unearthed from Old European settlement excavations. (Gimbutas, 1999, p. 15).

The working hypothesis developed by Gimbutas claims that matrifocal societies were replaced by the arrival of peoples from the Eurasian steppes with a pastoral economy and a patriarchal structure.

The Indo-European culture with its patriarchal and class-based social structure and its religion of warrior gods was superimposed on Europe in several stages: first in Central Europe in 4500-3000 BCE, after which it spread to the north and south in the first half of the third millennium BCE, coming later to the Aegean and Mediterranean islands. From the third millennium onwards, hybridised cultures and mythologies emerged. This led to the disappearance of the civilisation that Indo-European culture was superimposed onto, Old Europe, with its tens of thousands of figurines, beautifully painted pottery, frescoed temples, and orderly towns. It was replaced with hillforts and weapons and the emergence of a totally different symbolic system. (Gimbutas 2010, p. 135).

Hybrid cultures and mythologies like those in Ancient Greece still used feminine figures throughout the cycle of earthly life. Indeed, there were three goddesses of destiny – the Moirai or Fates (αἱ Μοῖραι) – in Greek mythology: Clotho, the spinner of life; Lachesis, the drawer of lots; and Atropos, the inevitable cutter of the thread of life.

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The fact that hybrid cultures and mythologies existed for centuries – rooted in narratives seeking answers to the meaning and purpose of life and its fleeting nature – may be interpreted as a sign of a collective imaginary. As Jung suggested, these archetypes were still elements of the individual unconscious: myths, symbols, and meanings which humanity has never experienced directly or personally. For Jung, this unconscious realm was not repressed but activated in the transitional phases of life (with the emergence of existential problems and dilemmas) when transformations were required, taking shape in dreams. Special archetypes thus came into being, including, for the purposes of this article, the mother archetype (Jung, 1981); according to Jung, this appears in dreams in the symbolic forms of a “vessel” – receiving, protecting, and concealing – and water³.

Drawing on Jung’s ideas, Erich Neumann (1981) developed an extensive and well-documented study on the phenomenology of the feminine framework of the unconscious, analysing the structure of the archetype of the Great Mother⁴.

When analytical psychology speaks of the primordial image or archetype of the Great Mother, it is referring, not to any concrete image existing in space and time, but to an inward image at work in the human psyche. The symbolic expression of this psychic phenomenon is to be found in the figures of the Great Goddess represented in the myths and artistic creations of

³In Schema II, Neumann outlined how the archetype of the Great Mother can variously take shape in dreams. He divided the Schema into three sections: an upper celestial part, a lower underworld, and a middle part encompassing the space between the two which is dominated by symbols deriving from the earth. The upper part, for example, includes vase, cauldron, oven, cup, chalice, breath, milk, fountain, trunk, plant, fruit, ear of wheat, bread, and flower. The middle section includes shield, dress, cloak, blanket, net, nest, coffin, cradle, ship, bed, wagon, garden, field, cornucopia, poppy, pomegranate, pond, sea, and water, while the lower part includes hell, tomb, urn, ravine, abyss, night, and darkness (Neumann, 1981, pp. 53-54).

⁴Neumann offered a summary of the different forms (symbols) assumed by the archetype of the Great Mother in human societies. He identified two axes in Schema III: positive-negative feminine configuration and positive-negative transformative character. The positive feminine configurations (Good Mother) and positive transformative character include Mother, Isis, Demeter, and Mary in the sector of vegetation mysteries and the Muses, Sophia, Mary, and virgins in the field of inspiration mysteries. *The negative feminine configurations (Terrible Mother) and negative transformative character* include the old witch, Gorgons, Hecate, and Kali in the sector of death mysteries and the young witch, Astarte, Circe, and Lilith in the field of intoxication mysteries (Neumann, 1981, pp. 89-90).

mankind.

The effect of this archetype may be followed through the whole of history, for we can demonstrate its workings in the rites, myths, symbols of early man and also in the dreams, fantasies, and creative works of the sound as well as the sick man of our own day (Neumann, 1981, p. 3).

Jung's theory of archetypes found empirical expression in his patient-based clinical research. Although factors of social and cultural conditioning were omitted, they nevertheless contributed to the form assumed by the pathology, if not the pathology itself. The collective imaginary has always been a multiform container, a mobiliser of energies and motivations that exists in and of itself.

The provisional hypothesis adopted herein is that the imaginary is collective and has a social connotation, as outlined by Valentina Grassi:

The term *imaginary* refers first and foremost to a “container” of images that an individual, group, and society have produced, preserved, and transformed over the course of human history. But it also refers to the dynamic process of the production, preservation, and transformation of images. Along these lines, this same notion can be associated with dynamic production and the products of the function of imagination, which develop subsequently with different levels of rationalisation (dreams, ghosts, utopias, collective representations, and ideologies).

Symbols, mythological “reservoirs”, and images produced by the imagination are the constituent elements of the vast field of the imaginary that forms the basis of “social” coexistence (Grassi, 2012, p. 33).

The concept of the social imaginary has acquired fresh importance for its succinct ability to mould social processes and dynamics in which the symbolic dimension takes on heuristic value⁵

It can be seen increasingly on a daily basis that those who take part in

⁵Let us begin by summarising what was discussed in the previous chapter, which I included in my little book *The Symbolic Imagination* about the “iconoclastic West”. The image has increasingly been minimised and reduced to “one percent” of the total cost of our ideological investments. The increase in dialectics in the style of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Scholasticism, Galileo, and Descartes has intensified over the centuries, underlining not only the irreversible divorce of Western thinking from various forms of “savage” Oriental thinking [...] but above all tearing – to use Kantian terminology – the Western conscience into two parts. One of these is noble, clear, and distinct, the cause and sign of all ‘the progress of conscience’ (the title chosen by Léon Brunschvicg for one of his books), while the other is consistent with the “one percent”, the accursed, to cite Georges Bataille, who are abandoned to increasingly mediatic forms of “fun”’; (Durand, 2022, p. 47).

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debates within the framework of Western culture act as a sounding board for the return of the myth and the rebirth of questions and visions of the world associated with the symbolic realm: in short, the “Galaxy of the Imaginary”. [...] Indeed, often against its will, our civilisation (the “perverse effects” of what is in front of our eyes), armed with the mathematical rationalism that disowns images, has finally produced a material occurrence with the seizure of power by the “queen of the faculties” – the imagination – by refining the scientific techniques furthest removed from the image (Durand 2022, p. 19).

The social imaginary is a human construct that takes its cue from the challenges posed by the surrounding environment; it is based on the motivational, social, cultural, technical, and material resources which can be accessed with inevitably limited degrees of freedom. These resources include symbols, myths, narratives, and stories that connect the past with the future, thereby giving meaning to the present. The social imaginary is not unconscious or subconscious, and inasmuch as the reality it perpetuates is effective and efficient, it enables individual action both on a personal and collective level. Durand claimed that some elements of the motivational field are invariable, as the challenges posed by birth, life, reproduction, and death must always be faced.

For Durand (2022), the social imaginary is not static but in constant flux: he described it as a flowing river fed by numerous tributaries, with currents of varying depth moving at different speeds. Depending on structural and environmental factors, the flow can include the creation and development of new myths and symbols. Similarly, past myths and symbols resurface, even if they have been dormant for centuries, while emerging and disadvantaged social groups produce their own respective symbols, myths, and ideologies.⁶ Central to Gilbert Durand’s thinking were the concepts of invariance (the stability of a symbol), relevance (the symbol still has a meaning for those who use or reactivate it), and a logical and rational connection between archetype and social imaginary. For these reasons, Durand’s theoretical perspective will be adopted to analyse whether the archetype of the Great Mother (encompassing the cycle of birth and death) is still effective and efficient today⁷.

Durand extended his work beyond mere cataloguing and description by attempting to explain why humankind creates symbols and why some archetypes (which are transformed into symbols) are recurrent. His hypothesis

⁶For Durand, the dominance of a social imaginary lasts around 100-150 years, until all the generations who pass on the chief traits of “their” social imaginary to their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren have died out (Durand, 2022).

⁷For original and innovative analysis of the archetype of the Great Mother in the contemporary media world, see Bartoletti (2023).

was that they are linked to particular phases of child development. Building on studies by C.G. Jung (1977, 1981, 2012), for whom symbols were structural parts of the unconscious which “speak” and emerge through dreams, he introduced the idea of three reflex dominants which provide a link between simple reflexes – of a universal nature, taking shape in bodies – and associated reflexes. The first of these is the position dominant, which acts as the coordinator or inhibitor of the other reflexes, for example when a child’s body straightens into an upright position: **high-low**. The second is the nutritional dominant, which appears even more evidently through the reflexes of lip sucking and the subsequent positioning of the head: **nutrition-digestion**. Here too, the effect is to condense stimuli from distant sources and to suppress the ability of the other centres to respond to direct stimuli. As in the previous case, all actions unrelated to the dominant reflex are delayed or inhibited. The third is the natural dominant – **movement-stasis** –, which has yet to be studied in detail in male adults. Despite the lack of information on this matter, Durand underlined the cyclical and internally motivated nature of the so-called copulative dominant, stressing that psychoanalysis normalised the idea of the dominance of animal behaviour in sexual drive. After all, mating behaviour is not organised through experience but is the result of the development of certain previously dormant nerve connections in the constitutional structure of the body. The motor schemata of copulation therefore depend on the eroticisation of the nervous system (Durand, 1999)⁸.

If, as Lévi-Strauss would have it, the natural has universality and spontaneity as its criteria, and is thus separated from the cultural, the domain of individuality, relativity and constraint, it is nevertheless necessary that an agreement be reached between nature and culture, in order to ensure that cultural content is *lived*. In a valid culture, one motivating human thought and reverie, the natural project provided by the dominant reflexes is overdetermined by a finality that replaces the prompting of the instincts. [...] A minimum affinity is thus mandatory between the reflex dominant and the cultural environment. Far from its being censorship and repression which motivate the image and give the symbol its vigour, it appears on the contrary that agreement between the reflex drives of the subject and his or her milieu anchors the main images necessarily in representation, and endows them with sufficient virtues and appropriateness for their perpetuation (Durand, 1999, pp. 52-53).

⁸The lengthy sections where Durand developed his thesis have been summarised to facilitate reading.

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Durand claimed that if nature (expressed through reflex drives) and culture did not converge, cultural and symbolic systems would only be constructs or human narratives without (and unable to have) universal features (typical of everything “natural”). This would contradict the fact that archetypes are a stable and recurring aspect of human culture.

Durand perceived archetypes as a meeting point between the imaginary and rational processes: a stable and recurring feature of human cultures connected to extremely different images in these cultures with various interlocking schemata. While an *archetype* is associated with ideas and substantiation, a *symbol* is simply related to a substantive and sometimes to a proper name. It can be claimed that a *myth* – a dynamic system generally taking shape in narratives under the impetus of a schema – is an extension of schemata, archetypes, and simple symbols. Myths are rough drafts of rationalisation as they draw on the narrative thread in which symbols are transformed into words and archetypes become ideas. Just as archetypes are a driving force of ideas and symbols generate names, myths foster *religious doctrines*, *philosophical systems*, and *historical and legendary narratives*. Finally, the structural mapping of schemata, archetypes, and symbols within myth systems or static groupings leads to verification of the existence of regulatory protocols for rendering imaginaries in stable and established *structures*. These groupings of neighbouring structures provide what Gilbert Durand (1972) called *Orders*.

Drawing on Durand’s suggestive in-depth analysis (1972) of the anthropological structures of the social imaginary, it could be said that the Diurnal Order – characterised by symbols of elevation, light, asceticism, transcendence, and action – becomes one of the forms assumed by archetypes (constants that drive human action) in societies. There is a line of continuity here with Gimbutas’s theme of the decline of ‘matrifocal’ societies in terms of signification, sense, and motivation. For centuries, there has been a gradual but profound metamorphosis of the social imaginary, with an increasingly negative cultural connotation of the Nocturnal Order, which is characterised by symbols of fall, birth, death, earth that germinates and ‘receives’ the dead, darkness, and moisture (which in turn refer to the image of the maternal womb). It is weak because it is marked by the symbols and myths of abandonment, depths in which humanity loses its way. From this emerges the myth of Narcissus, who drowns while attempting to embrace his own reflection in the water⁹.

In terms of behavioural motivation, the two Orders are characterised by two contrasting processes: self-realisation v dependency, self-orientation v

⁹For Durand, the two Orders co-exist even if they carry different weight and different cultural meanings in the construction of the social imaginary, depending on the socio-cultural and structural reference frameworks.

alter-orientation, and individualization v sociation¹⁰. Both Orders co-exist, albeit with different balances¹¹.

2. The dormancy of the Great Mother: the Nocturnal versus the Diurnal

The two Regimes have been co-existing for centuries, generating hybrid cultures and mythologies since the third millennium BCE. The internal patriarchal structures of these hybrid forms have perpetuated rituals, symbols, and narratives associated with the care and protection of the home, birth, crops, sowing, and harvest. “Feminine” symbols and rituals were reserved for female deities at a time when farming still played a key role in the material survival of entire populations. Remaining within Durand’s semantic field, the Nocturnal Order had its own separate meaning and symbolic value that did not conflict with or invade the Diurnal Order, even though the emergence of Greek philosophy produced a narrative on women’s inferiority to men. This led to a cultural and political split between the male public domain and the female private domain.

The peaceful co-existence between these two Orders began to crumble with the advent of Christianity and the widespread process of the Christianisation of “pagans” throughout Europe. But who were these pagans? They were the inhabitants of far-off isolated villages where the Word of God had not arrived yet. For this reason, they continued to worship and make offerings to their old deities, for whom there was no place in the symbolic Christian world. Many of these divinities clearly had their roots in the ancient culture of Mother Earth, the Great Mother. Pagans were often polytheists as they needed different points of reference and support to make sense of the extreme hardships of daily life and survival. Even Christian converts often

¹⁰Drawing on G. Simmel, ‘sociation’ refers to the process through which forms of mutual interaction become stable and fixed over time. For Simmel, society was created by the set of stabilised forms of mutual interaction. In this article, by analogy, the term sociation is used to refer to processes of identity construction, considering individualisation as the set of processes based on separation/detachment from alters and sociation as the processes based on connections/relations with alters.

¹¹For example, in social imaginaries characterised by the Diurnal Order, whose symbol is the Hero and whose myth is the Hero who fights and wins, despair, resignation, and surrender become signs of a typically feminine weakness. In this case, a man who is afraid, cries, and throws in the towel becomes a sissy. The same mechanism is often still activated in the “dares” that teenage boys perform, with the weak who capitulate becoming objects of derision and victims of bullying.

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continued to honour their old deities or attributed the latter's powers to new deities, which is what happened with Mary of Nazareth, mother of Christ.

In the spirit of the ancient Mediterranean Mother

The image of the Virgin Mary merged with the fertility goddesses, becoming an integral part of the complex ritual heritage of the people. Protective deities were also absorbed by Mary, who thus became the keeper of the mystery of procreation, the guardian of the key to understanding life itself. For this reason, she was closely associated with women, the sources of life. She took on the functions and credentials reserved for the pre-existing goddesses in the Mediterranean pantheon: Ishtar (the dispenser of life), Isis (mother of the god Horus), Cybele (the Great Mother), and the Queen of Heaven, to whom Jewish women paid idolatrous honours (Valerio, 2017, p. 39).

Cults of Madonnas of trees and springs remained (Valerio, 2017), while the cult of the Virgin spread, penetrating different social and cultural contexts despite initial resistance from the Church. Although the Marian Cult was officially recognised in Pope Pius XII's Dogma of the Assumption of Mary in 1950, there was still an essentially contemptuous attitude towards flesh-and-blood females at all levels of the social hierarchy. There is no need to repeat the words, phrases, and judgements levelled at women, whose dignity only remained intact if they were mothers and obedient wives, or saints and martyrs¹².

As the Nocturnal Order associated with women was constantly and systematically eroded, women lost – or rather were deprived of – the underlying elements of their symbolic power: responsibility for pregnancy, childbirth, and caring for new lives. As these skills and expertise have been absorbed into the framework of medicine, technology, and healthcare, the female body is often no longer perceived as an essential container for the physical and biological development of a foetus. Indeed, since the foetus is now seen as extraneous to the female body, it can be placed inside any non-human container with the proper technical equipment and control (Di Nicola, 2024).

¹²For Camorrino (2022), the dogma of the Assumption of the Virgin is the subsumption of aspects of the Nocturnal Order (earth, body, fall, deep, generativity = immanence) into the Diurnal Order (heaven, spirit, elevation = transcendence). Although this is an interesting interpretation, it must be pointed out that the dogma of the Assumption only dates back to 1950, after centuries in which the Marian cult was firmly established in the Nocturnal Order.

3. The ‘rediscovery’ of the Great Mother and the symbolic code of care

Certain elements of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s led to the rediscovery of the feminine-specific (rather than the Great Mother). Rooted in the experience of motherhood and care, this set of distinctive features identified a clear and irreconcilable difference between the (masculine) logic of performance and the (feminine) logic of reciprocity in the construction of masculine and feminine identities. These two logics were applied to different areas and contexts of everyday life: the male-dominated world of work and the female-dominated private sphere of the home. Starting from the observation that we are all born of women and therefore all experience an exclusive relationship with our mother (or rather her body), the contrast between the masculine and feminine worlds came to be seen as the outcome of an age-old battle that women lost. This defeat was due to the fact that the whole of society was imbued with the values and systems associated with performance, increasing wealth, competition, and exploitation of the environment and natural resources. The realms of everyday life in this society were taken over by the instrumental dimension. To use Durand’s terminology, the Diurnal Order in the dominant social imaginary displayed a powerful cohesive force for society as a whole, effectively motivating the behaviour of all social actors involved.

In this cultural context, the (feminine) Nocturnal Order began to emerge as a remedial antagonist to a worldview whose limitations were starting to emerge. J. C. Tronto (2013) developed a well-structured argument to demonstrate the need to break down the boundaries between two ethical realms: a masculine-inspired ethic based on the values of protecting individual rights with a decontextualised concept of justice and a feminine-inspired ethic of care based on the values of protecting relational rights with a contextualised concept of justice. As the blurb on the Italian translation of Tronto’s volume explained, our concept of moral life should provide us with a way to respect and treat others fairly. In order to achieve this, we need to place value on what most people do throughout their lives by caring for themselves, others, and the world around them.

Ecological movements have sprung up to protect nature and its resources, just as women’s emancipation movements have grown. While ideas of “limitations on growth” and de-growth have emerged, on an individual level people have discovered – or perhaps revived – Eastern philosophies that emphasise the elements of continuity and blending between nature and culture, and between humans and their physical environment. These movements all involve men and women alike. A fresh concept of happiness and wellness is slowly emerging with a gradual transition from a society focused on satisfying

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material needs to one with post-materialistic values and a new concept of wellbeing (Inglehart, 1998). The dream is looming on the horizon: the myth of a society that is more egalitarian, more inclusive, more righteous, and more welcoming. In this society, the archetype of the Great Mother is both a symbol and a starting point for innovation and change.

4. The archetype of the Great Mother in “maternal” societies

The end of the Second World War ushered in decades of economic development in Europe and other so-called developed nations in the West and the northern hemisphere. Major redistribution policies generated an increase in individual and collective wellbeing with a reduction in poverty and a decreasing wealth gap between social classes. While archetypes generated symbols and myths that inspired action, the Nocturnal Order resurfaced forcefully with its feminine overtones and values when the structures of society, the economy, and culture were at peace. This resulted in a relative increase in processes of self-determination and individual self-fulfilment (Camorrino 2024a), often giving rise to narcissism¹³.

The changes in the social and cultural structure that took place during the twentieth century, culminating in the 1960s, reduced the harshness of life to such an extent that they fostered the emergence of a collective mentality in the West, which Giovanni Sartori referred to as ‘post-hardship culture’. These structural changes brought about by technological and organisational progress greatly increased wealth and income and improved quality of life, transforming the former production-dominated ‘society of scarcity’ into the consumption-dominated ‘affluent society’, (...) Thus relieved of the burdens of adult life, individuals find themselves enveloped in narcissism that is typical of childhood, as if to say: *hic manebimus optime*, here we will remain most excellently (Cesareo & Vaccarini, 2013, p. 23)¹⁴.

It might be said that although the strong and successful Ego which dominated the twentieth century has not weakened, its boundaries have become

¹³Self-determination (building one’s own identity without the burdens and constraints of tradition, religion, and the past) and self-fulfilment (creating one’s own path in life by implementing strategies based on satisfying personal desires, aspirations, and needs) are the two sides of the concept of freedom; freedom from (conditioning) and freedom of (choice); (Di Nicola & Viviani, 2022).

¹⁴Vaccarini and Cesareo referred to two studies by G. Sartori: *Elementi di teoria politica. Bologna: il Mulino 1995 and Homo videns. Televisione e post-pensiero. Bari-Roma: Laterza 1999.*

more flexible (in moral, ethical, cultural, and symbolic terms) at the start of the twenty-first century. To use a current buzzword, it is now characterised by fluidity. This reflects – and is reflected – in a social imaginary in which the archetype of the Great Mother plays a significant role with all its positive and negative ambivalence.

4.1 The Good Mother

In the social imaginary that first took shape in the 1960s and 70s, the Diurnal Order was equipped with symbols and myths of progress and ongoing development, offering reassurances and guarantees of a cultural climate with a low level of social conflict. The archetype of the Great Mother, on the other hand, took shape as an all-inclusive maternal society. Class struggles were thus followed by identity struggles, emphasis on recognition (attributing the same dignity and respect to the Alter and the Ego), and multicultural policies. The new watchword (symbol?) was inclusion. In this social imaginary, the myth of the Great Mother rooted in the Nocturnal Order also gave rise to heavily ego-centred symbols and narratives that viewed consumption (resulting in immediate self-gratification) and material and individual wellbeing as the horizon of meaning encompassing the frantic human search for happiness. Two new narratives emerged: a welcoming and protective mother and an inclusive, well-meaning society.: *The welcoming and protective mother: the inviting and inclusive society.*

The narrative of an inclusive, welcoming society emerges from the currently dominant social imaginary. According to this, we are all equal because we are all children, and like all children we are loved, accepted, justified, and forgiven for whatever we do or refrain from doing. There is strong emphasis on self-fulfilment – a key goal in life – in an increasingly secularised society which has moved away from religious symbols and myths.

From this perspective, secularisation corresponds to a radical transformation of the relationship with the temporal order, no longer seen as the source of the sacred [...]. It is therefore at this moment and by virtue of such changes that the subject turns inwards on itself in a 'reflective' manner, undertaking an 'exploration' of its inner being which is no longer in search of God, having distanced itself from the transcendent realm, but in search of a 'Self', a radiating hub which can confer order on existing in the world. (Camorrino 2024a, pp. 61-62).:

With the investments made in the self, the body, and feelings, the concept

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of wellbeing has changed.

In today's societies, wellbeing has become a kind of secular religion, largely substituting a happiness that is probably unattainable or in any case fleeting and temporary. It has replaced both striving for transcendence in ancient societies and the autonomous immanence of the accumulation and production of the "early" bourgeois ethos, attributing all this with a concrete and tangible goal: wellbeing in the real world with regard to the body, the mind, relationships, and the self. (Secondulfo, 2011, p. 10).

The myth of happiness has become a dominant feature of the present-day social imaginary, producing narratives which frame happiness not as a virtue but as the result of new practices centred on caring for the self, the body, feelings, and relationships. Numerous handbooks and courses (in person or online) teach how to achieve wellbeing and happiness and how to make them last. A solution to every problem is now sought from an external source, whether from an expert, a book, a course, or a personal trainer. Happiness is synonymous with freedom (Di Nicola & Viviani, 2022), which is perceived as self-determination and self-fulfilment.

With the increase in self-reflection in a society of individuals, there are more opportunities to pursue life paths which both different and original. Indeed, people are free to live and operate in their private sphere, but also in society as a whole. In this way, freedom has become a new myth. For example, movements for environmental protection have gained strength and empowerment, along with civic and political engagement to stem the climate crisis and bring about new models of development and growth. At the same time, new forms of spirituality are taking shape (Camorrino, 2024b), reopening the debate on transcendence and the sacred, albeit on different levels. As Camorrino argued, the relationship with the sacred realm in these new spiritual manifestations is played out entirely in terms of immanence. This means that transcendence – a key aspect of sacrality – is suppressed. As a synonym for the here and now and for wellbeing understood as happiness and emotional and relational gratification, immanence is a characteristic feature of the maternal Nocturnal Order.

The growth in self-reflective capabilities also signifies a desire to exercise control over the body and the emotions it transmits. Far from being perceived solely as an aspect to be controlled and hidden, emotions have forcefully entered the cognitive sphere and become a compass for the formulation of ethical judgements. The self has also become "sentient", providing company and guidance in daily routines: at work, in relationships, and in the ability to connect with others. Emotions and feelings can serve as a mechanism for

reactivating practices of civic and social engagement. As Cerulo put it, ‘The Western world could be defined as a *society of emotions* as it is characterised by multiple, interconnected forms of social interaction. Indeed, we are forced to deal with many different emotional stimuli that affect us on a daily basis’ (Cerulo, 2014, p. 7). In the wake of the suggestions in Martha Nussbaum’s seminal study *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*,¹⁵ Cerulo maintained that ‘emotions are not elements of individual and social instability or incentives for standardisation: through Nussbaum’s analysis, emotions become individual compasses for behavioural assessment, constituent parts of an ethical reasoning’ which can result in ‘leaving the innermost private sphere to express, share, and spread personal emotions with those of others in the public arena’ (Cerulo, 2014, p. 20, 21).

In the current social imaginary, there is positive emphasis on the inclusion of those who are different because of their disabilities, their non-heteronormative sexual orientation, their minority religious beliefs outside the socio-cultural context of reference, their status as immigrants and foreigners, or their commitment to creating a more just society.

Self-determination, freedom, equality, and happiness have become symbolic terms adopted for thinking and living in contemporary society.

4.1.1. The inclusive and well-meaning society

If the processes of inclusion and combating discrimination are not accompanied by systematic and sustained incisive action, the potential result is a form of nominalism based on the belief that a new name can effects change. If, as Nancy Fraser suggested, there can be no recognition without redistribution, inequality and discrimination cannot be defeated by replacing language and history.

A paradoxical situation has arisen in which many are wondering if they are still allowed to say anything (Bordone *et. al.*, 2022). Indeed, being ‘foolishly correct’ (Ricolfi, 2024) has effectively become another form of exclusion, with the new elite creating a division between those who “know what they should say” and those who don’t, simply because they are concerned with other issues (especially of a financial and structural nature).

Given that imposing linguistic change is an authoritarian gesture to convince people that all problems have been solved, awareness of what is really happening is required. Ricolfi’s contribution to this end is enlightening (2024).

¹⁵The volume was first published by Cambridge University Press in 2001.

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With regard to language, words such as blind, fat, normal, and woman can no longer be used, purportedly to safeguard the dignity of the socially excluded. New terms need to be invented so as not to offend or exclude the disabled or the obese, just to cite two examples. The use of the word “normal” might offend anyone who believes that the concept of normality discriminates against those who claim there is no such thing. Some are even disturbed by the word “woman” as it excludes non-binary people; the suggested alternatives are “person with a uterus” or even “person with a menstrual cycle”¹⁶! Proposals have also been put forward by LGBT+ communities to eliminate masculine and feminine endings in certain languages and replace them with new symbols like asterisks or schwas, which no one knows how to pronounce. The role of male-female biological difference in the construction of identity is sometimes completely rejected on the grounds that it can be shaped entirely by culture. “Feeling” is seen as decisive in the construction of sexual identity, and it is expected that subjective feeling is also documented in the registry office¹⁷.

The picture that emerges is one of a totally self-determined individual who requires no relational contact with a member of the opposite sex even for the purpose of reproduction. To this end, medically assisted procreation techniques (above all heterologous forms) have separated the moment of fertilisation from the bodies of men and women. This makes procreation something of a magic act performed with technology, thereby weakening the symbolic image of women as generators of life (Di Nicola, 2021, 2024).

The cancel culture movement is also driven by the principle of inclusion, restoring justice to those traditionally excluded and scorned. Attempts are thus being made to rewrite history to show not only that various forms of diversity existed in the past but also that they were accepted as a matter of course. Films and TV series now often feature black actors playing historical characters (from the seventeenth, eighteenth, or early nineteenth centuries) whose very existence would have been unthinkable in those roles and at those moments in history. Similarly, at least one leading character in every film or TV series set in the past is now gay or lesbian. In reality, racial segregation was sometimes legally enforced in these historical settings and homosexuality was a criminal, if not a capital, offence. The physical appearances of some fairy tale characters from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been altered, while books (especially school textbooks) have been purged, removing everything that does not “sound right” to present-day ears. There are also calls to tear down monuments

¹⁶Strangely enough, there are no plans to replace “man” with “person equipped with testicles”.

¹⁷This expectation is more than legitimate for all those (transgender people) who have completed their sex change journey (from male to female or vice versa).

dedicated to certain historical figures. While these individuals are undoubtedly problematic, they should perhaps be remembered for the harm they caused to avoid repeating the same mistakes. History should be supplemented, not changed. Some have petitioned, for example, for Columbus Day to be abolished out of respect for Native American minorities, as if cancelling this public holiday would absolve those – mostly European immigrants between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries – who destroyed the Native American communities.

Political correctness is also applied to music, theatre, and the other arts. As Ricolfi points out (2024), some American music schools no longer play Claude Debussy because of his nationalist politics, while Wagner is sidelined because his music appealed to the Nazis. In Italy, there are campaigns to remove warmongering lyrics from the anthem of the Alpini, the mountain corps of the Italian army, and to rewrite the national anthem – *Inno di Mameli* – because of its sexist wording. During a recent primary school Christmas play, the word Jesus was replaced with Cucù so as not to offend children of other religions, thereby losing the symbolic and religious meaning of the birth of Christ, a fading image in the minds of Italian children. For them, Christmas is ultimately just an opportunity to receive gifts from a highly secular and profane Santa Claus.

As a result of the new ideological mechanisms, white Western societies feel duty bound to apologise for existing as they are blamed for the wrongdoings of their predecessors against other populations. There is no doubt that these iniquities were committed, and present-day repentance does nothing to make them disappear. The newly constructed narratives reflect the image of a society that is well-meaning and welcoming but “neutral”, without any form of diversity or difference. Paradoxically, the demand to defend and promote minorities has been transformed into denial rather than recognition; instead of being accepted per se, diversity is deemed non-existent! The idea of a neutral society made up of essentially equal individuals (at least in terms of opportunities and life choices) is entirely false because there is never an equal starting point for everyone. It is also fundamentally hypocritical as it conveys the message that discrimination, inequality, and contempt will disappear simply by renaming them without needing to leave the house or put down the remote control¹⁸.

¹⁸If addressed only through nominalist practices, struggles for recognition by LGBT+ movements tend to hide the fact that not everyone is on the same starting line. Gays and lesbians know only too well from experience, for example, that their rights to be different can be easily negotiable or denied in different parts of the world, just as transgender people are fully aware – from the early stages of identity formation – of the drama of having a body that is different from the one they perceive.

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A new narrative has been constructed especially for the benefit and consumption of children. There are no villains in this fairy-tale magical world because we are all equal: featherless and sexless chicks raised and protected by the Great Mother.

The false image of a neutral society fails to fully conceal the actions of the Bad Mother.

4.2 *The Bad Mother*

In many ways, the Mother's bad side is embodied by the neutral society created in the social imaginary, which supposedly enhances the freedom and self-determination of social actors. She does not relinquish power over her children and keeps them tied to her apron strings rather than encouraging emancipation. By handing out instant gratification through consumption, which has now penetrated all aspects of daily life, she suppresses her children's desire to break free from their maternal dependency. Life is now grounded in the moment, with the knowledge that this immediacy can take on an eternal quality without any responsibility or pressure to take a stand. The most significant undertaking of many parents, especially mothers, is to spare their children any form of dissatisfaction by declaring war on teachers who dare to award them a low mark or a failing grade.

The boundaries between true and false, good and bad, and just and unjust have become blurred because such dilemmas no longer play a meaningful role in life or survival. Indeed, the Mother will accept and forgive everything. As a result, there are rising levels of addiction among young people (and others): alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling, internet videos, and social media. This creates a bubble of dependency from which it is extremely difficult to escape, often because of a lack of motivation and purpose to break free.

The self that governs happiness and emotions is not introspective but controlled by society, which benefits from this dependency.

Through cold intimacy (Illouz, 2007), which relies on distancing oneself from others for fear of co-dependency and on extensive commercialisation of the care sector (Hochschild, 2006), close emotional relationships have been transformed into a battlefield between the "need for pleasure" (which is nothing more than a desire for acceptance) and the "fear of rejection" (which is a source of frustration). The result of the spread of cold intimacy, characterised by emotional management based on suspicion and non-involvement, is a social imaginary in which interpersonal relationships are not only rarer but also often

superfluous. Money can buy anything because everything is for sale at the right price. Self-care has become a question of going to the gym, while the challenge in the emotional sphere is independence: carefully managing emotions to avoid relying on others. Social and emotional ties have become a burden as they restrict individual autonomy and lead to unhappiness if not properly controlled (Di Nicola & Viviani, 2022).

Contentment and wellbeing have become a new business venture peddled by the happiness industry (Bacanas & Illouz, 2019; Davies, 2016).

Industries and services implement option-based approaches and customisation strategies for products and prices, while large retailers engage in differentiation and segmentation policies. However, all these changes merely increase the commercialisation of lifestyles, further fuelling the frenzy for needs and raising the bar of the “more and more, always new” logic which was implemented so successfully in the second half of the twentieth century. It is in these terms that we should consider “leaving” the consumer society, pulling out from the top rather than the bottom and through hyper-materialism rather than post-materialism.

The new society that is dawning feeds on hyper-consumption, not “de-consumption” (Lipovetsky, 2007, p. 5).

The nurturing Good Mother has thus turned into the Bad Mother who never weans her children off her milk.

The other prevalent aspect is cultural relativism, which is typical of a society characterised by *minimalist narcissism* (Cesareo & Vaccarini, 2013) in which civic and political engagement are no longer perceived as desirable. A self-contained ‘minimal self’ takes root at a micro level (Lasch, 1981, 1987), cultivating individual wellbeing, while the ‘fall of public man’ can be seen at a macro level (Bellah et al., 1996; Putman, 2004, Sennet, 2006). The misconceptions of freedom and cognitive and emotional self-sufficiency are reinforced by mass media, advertising, and social media, where dissent can be expressed in the full knowledge that it is not expected to be translated into action. Potentially accessible to all, social media empowers everyone with a voice, reinforcing the feeling that we are all free. Above all, social media can be used to engage with those who think similarly, reinforcing ideas and opinions without any exposure to contrasting views. Social media also offers opportunities for entertainment and joining groups. However, even for frequent users, the other group members are generally just contacts rather than real connections. As Bauman put it, you can disconnect from social media whenever you want. For many young people, social media has become an interactive space playing a determining role for better or for worse.

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Mass media and social media should not be demonised. These new communication tools have entered the lives of people of all ages and become part of their everyday reality. Teachers assign homework via email, banks are transferring all their services online, and it is almost mandatory to go online to contact utility providers, local councils, public offices, healthcare services, hotels, and ticket offices (for trains, but also museums and so on). This undoubtedly has advantages as many services can now be accessed from home. At the same time, though, these services have predetermined communication formats, leaving those with specific problems unclear about who to contact. It is not services which have become standardised but user profiles, whose distinctive features are sometimes never allowed to emerge. Someone or something is perceived to be up there in the ether, influencing lives like a new God. There is no chance to communicate either, because nothing is known about their identity or location.

5. Eternal children: the dream/nightmare of a horizontal society

This article has analysed the deep-rooted changes in the structural, economic, and cultural conditions of societies (not only in the West) at the beginning of the twenty-first century (a subject on which major contributions have already been written). To give some, albeit approximate, sense of these changes, it is sufficient to mention phenomena such as the stall in economic and social development, and the increase in global inequalities both within and between developed and developing nations. In addition, while the climate crisis demonstrates that limiting growth is no longer a viable strategy, the resource of labour has become a cost, leading to rising unemployment especially in the middle and lower-middle classes. Finally, with war once again becoming a reality for Europeans, competition is underway for control of the (rare earth) raw materials needed for technological development. Material needs are back in vogue, while post-material needs are now in decline (Secondulfo, 2023). The dream of living in a horizontal society has been shattered, and the narrative of equality has become a nightmare.

The Diurnal Order has regained momentum, producing fresh symbols, myths, and narratives. The new e-society refers – not only symbolically – to a social reality in which everything operates online as part of a global communications system. The new myths are the deterritorialisation of relationships and people, the commodification of the human body and its parts, the achievement of immortality, the colonisation of our solar system, the centralisation of social control systems, and the obsolescence of taxation and consequent winding-up of welfare systems which are costly and only result in

dependency. New narratives have emerged in which, for example, security becomes a goal to pursue on a global level, requiring personal sacrifices like a reduction in individual freedom, the destruction of privacy barriers, and restrictions placed on opportunities for dissent (if they are not removed altogether). The commitment to security is strengthened by creating – or perhaps dusting off – enemies such as immigrants, foreigners, minorities, the poor, and the dispossessed.

The negative side of the Nocturnal Order, which originated from the archetype of the Great Mother, can still be seen in passivity, privatism, disinterest in public affairs, and contentment with personal circumstances. With the blurring of differences between true and false and right and wrong, cultural relativism has played into the hands of a social imaginary over which those in power demand free reign.

The Good Mother is under attack from groups and activists who have resurrected questions of race and, naturally, a purity to be protected. Alongside this lies the notion of a homeland whose geographical and cultural boundaries must be defended, and the stigmatisation of LGBT+ and feminist movements. In this sense, the horizontal society has become a nightmare for all those who believe in inclusion and equality. Here's hoping – but this is only a wish – that this nightmare will give rise to processes of transformation and change.

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