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**SYMBOLIC PATTERNS
OF CHILDBIRTH**

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I. CHILDBIRTH AS SYMBOLIC PATTERNS, EXPERIENCE AND PERFORMANCE

Childbirth can acquire manifold meanings in myths, philosophy, literature and religion some of which here will be grouped together and explored as symbolic patterns. By “childbirth” I mean the coming into existence of a child, which is treated differently by the four different symbolic patterns to be analyzed. These symbolic patterns are rather heterogenous, sometimes attributing the coming into existence of a child primarily to male “procreation” (“The Supremacy of the Male”), sometimes more relating childbirth to conception, pregnancy and birthgiving on part of the woman (“The Supremacy of the Female”). Furthermore, the symbolic pattern labeled “Theoretical, Spiritual and Political Natality versus Childbirth” leaves aside the question of which body – male or female – gives the more important contribution to the coming into existence of a child. Here, rather, childbirth is seen as lower in value as the realms of ideas, religion, the political or the arts. In contrast to this the symbolic pattern “Harmony between Spiritual/Theoretical Natality and Childbirth” shows that some kind of a “spiritual” birth and childbirth can also go hand in hand with each other. The symbolic patterns of childbirth to be analyzed may reflect, stabilize, subvert, change and constitute power relations (e.g. with regard to gender).

This work situates itself in the framework of a specific type of sociological study termed “reflexive sociology”¹ which attempts to uncover “the taken for granted structure of the everyday life-world and of the practice of human communication and understanding.”² In its understanding of childbirth as a symbolic pattern, this study seeks to analyze some codes developed in relation to childbirth which have persisted throughout time and space. In this sense, “Symbolic Patterns of Childbirth” is similar to a

1 Arpád Szakolczai, *Max Weber and Michel Foucault: Parallel Life-Works*, (London: Routledge, 1998), 17.

2 Ibid. 16.

study by Mircea Eliades on initiation rites in different times and places.³ Eliades's discussion of the problems inherent in such an approach also holds for this work: "Although it is risky to compare [...] documents belonging to such different ages and cultures, I have taken the risk because all these [...] facts fit into a pattern."⁴

"Symbolic Patterns of Childbirth" has a historical dimension in so far as the four different ways of constructing childbirth can be traced in texts of different times, places and cultures. Although many of these texts enjoyed an important status in a particular time and place, I do not want to claim that they represent a dominant symbolic construction of childbirth in a given society, but rather, that they all testify to some kind of a continuing pattern in relation to the intellectual discourse on childbirth. That is to say, I leave aside the question as to whether certain ways of giving meaning to childbirth were or are socially dominant, or deviant. This huge task has to be left to historians.

As the interest of this work lies with identifying symbolic patterns of childbirth in a broad comparative perspective there equally is no room for situating the texts chosen for analysis in the frame of the history of the body. However, it has to be pointed out that the texts unfold on a variety of historical backgrounds determining what is male, what is female and how gender related to childbirth is experienced. Barbara Duden's major contributions to the history of childbirth⁵ have shown that there is no such a thing as a timeless relationship between a "natural" female body and the experience of such a body. Even the notion of "having a body" is a relatively recent one going back to the 18th century.⁶ The same reflections can of course be applied to the history of the "male" body and "procreation". An illustrative example for the historicity of the body in relation to childbirth is the varying understanding of the uterus according to different times and places. Thus, for example, while in modern medicine the uterus is conceived of as having one location only, in Ancient Egypt a woman could be considered to have fallen ill as a result of her uterus having moved to a

3 See Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth*, trans. Willard R. Trask (1958; reprint, New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

4 See *ibid.*, 58.

5 See e.g. Barbara Duden, *A Doctor's Patients in Eighteenth-Century Germany*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

6 See *ibid.*, 2.

“wrong spot.”⁷ In this case the treatment of the “wandering womb”⁸ could consist of luring the uterus into descending again by taking measures such as applying fragrant substances to the lower parts of the woman’s body.

Though the historical dimension of the body in relation to childbirth will be occasionally touched upon,⁹ in general it stays in the background. What is foregrounded here, however, are some symbolic patterns of childbirth, which in manifold variations, can be traced through time and space. As the specific interest of this book lies with this broad comparative perspective, the single texts here grouped together and analyzed as symbolic patterns of childbirth can thus neither be considered in historical nor in philological depth. Because the sources cover a broad range of languages it was necessary to work with translations. And with this, the risk of shortcomings and altered meaning is taken. However, on the whole, the chosen sources will still testify to different symbolic patterns of childbirth even if occasionally a misinterpretation based on translation may have crept in.

The continuities of the symbolic patterns of childbirth presented here can hardly be explained by specific socio-historical configurations. One might think of psychology as a tool to understand them. For instance, in his study of the social construction of masculinity,¹⁰ David D. Gilmore used psychology to explain the recurrent patterns he encountered from Homer to modern and non-modern societies. In the case of the symbolic constructions of childbirth it will instead be necessary to turn to anthropology and to philosophy to explain the continuities found. Victor Turner’s ideas on experience and performance are of crucial importance here as they become intertwined with the question of how cultural codes are perpetuated.¹¹

Victor Turner elaborates on experience by drawing upon Dilthey’s conception of *Erlebnis*. According to Turner experience should not be regarded as a “self-enclosed unity.”¹² Rather, it is deeply relational in two

7 See for this and the following Ilza Veith, *Hysteria: The History of a Disease* (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1993), 3–5.

8 Ibid., 2.

9 See e.g. the chapters on Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and Tertullian in section III.1. “The Supremacy of the Male.”

10 See David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making. Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990).

11 See Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience* (Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 1985), 205–226.

12 Ibid., 211.

senses: First of all with regard to the life and past of an individual because “the category of *meaning* arises in *memory*,”¹³ secondly, with regard to the social environment of the individual. It is to the latter that Turner connects the notion of “performance” which is crucial for the understanding of the perpetuation of cultural codes (in our case regarding childbirth).

Cultural codes are the products of condensed experiences. The moment that they are performed, they render it possible for individuals to access the experiences of people who lived before them. Turner writes:

For our species meaning is entwined with inter-subjectivity, how we know, feel, and desire one another. Our means of communication (language, cultural codes) are saturated, whether we know this or not, with the experiences of our progenitors and forerunners. But these codes can never be experienced unless they are periodically, or at least occasionally, *performed*. We have to try to re-experience in performance, whether as ritual, festival, theatre, or other active modalities of religion, law, politics, or art, as best we can, the socially bequeathed sparks of lives now biologically extinguished.¹⁴

The perpetuation of cultural codes may have an important influence on the individual’s experiential perception:

Culture is [...] to be regarded as the crystallized secretion of once living human experience [...] which is still capable of liquefaction back into similar if not identical lived-through experience under favorable conditions, like the reputed miracle of Saint Januarius’ dried blood.¹⁵

Turner’s theory about the transmission of cultural codes may contribute to solving some of the problems related to the history of ideas. In his study of gnostic worldview,¹⁶ Ioan P. Couliano sees ideas as forming “systems that can be envisaged as ‘ideal’ objects.” However, “these ideal objects cross the surface of history called time [...] in an apparently unpredictable sequence of temporal events ... At this stage of research we are unable to

13 Ibid., 214.

14 Ibid., 207.

15 Ibid., 224. In Naples three times a year feasts are celebrated during which a miracle may occur: the coagulated blood of the Christian martyr Saint Januarius which is preserved in two ampoules may liquefy then.

16 See Ioan Peter Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism*, trans. by H.S. Wiesner (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992).

go much beyond the mere recognition of systems in their logical dimension.”¹⁷

Couliano’s statement about the unpredictability of the (re)manifestation of ideas would mean in Turner’s language, to talk about the unpredictability of the (re)activation of a cultural code. As has been shown above, for Turner, culture as condensed experience may always lead to an experience of a feeling or a situation located in history. This would account for the possibility of ideas moving from the background of the stage of history to the foreground and vice versa. However, the question remains why certain ideas are (re)activated in certain times and others not. As has already been pointed out this question can only be answered by historians.

Turner’s ideas on experience and performance are helpful to explain the perpetuation of cultural codes (ideas included), and even experiences in relation to childbirth. However, for a better understanding of the internal logic of the four symbolic patterns of childbirth chosen for analysis, a general conception of childbirth from a philosophical point of view seems to be necessary. In the following, the attempt will be made to conceive of birth on the basis of the philosophy of Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger. Hannah Arendt’s philosophy of natality provides the frame for conceptualizing birth as one way of accessing both a beginning and a “mortal immortality.” Furthermore, Heidegger’s understanding of the situation of the dying person will be explored as a paradigm for conceiving of the birthgiving woman.

17 Ibid., 3, 7.