
Women and Italian history at the crossroads of new perspectives

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Il contributo si confronta con i saggi contenuti nel recente volume curato da Silvia Salvatici, “Storia delle donne nell’Italia contemporanea” (Roma, Carocci, 2022), facendo emergere l’originalità del patrimonio di studi accumulato sul tema negli ultimi decenni. Il testo si concentra sulla sfida metodologica proposta dal libro, che intreccia storia nazionale e storia globale e utilizza il genere come un prisma attraverso cui rinnovare la storia d’Italia dall’Unificazione ai decenni più vicini ai nostri.

Parole chiave: storia delle donne e di genere, storia dell’Italia contemporanea, global history

This article discusses the recent volume edited by Silvia Salvatici, “Storia delle donne nell’Italia contemporanea” (Rome, Carocci, 2022). It highlights the originality of studies published on the subject in recent decades and focuses on the methodological challenge of the book, which interweaves national and global history and uses a gender perspective to rewrite the history of Italy from the Unification to the present day.

Key words: women and gender history, contemporary Italian history, global history

Can we revisit the history of contemporary Italy from the perspective of women’s and gender history? This question is at the heart of the ambitious project coordinated by Silvia Salvatici; presenting the views of nine female authors and one male author, it manages to broaden the analysis of a history that began in 1861 and continues to the present day.¹ *Storia delle donne nell’Italia contemporanea* does not aim to explore the patterns and behaviour of women, for example by linking these to the phenomenon of modernisation,² nor is it an attempt to trace collective biographies to understand transforma-

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¹ Silvia Salvatici, *Storia delle donne nell’Italia contemporanea*, Rome, Carocci, 2022.

² For a similar analysis, see Michela De Giorgio, *Le italiane dall’unità a oggi. Modelli culturali e comportamenti sociali*, Rome, Laterza, 1993.

tions and caesuras in a defined chronological time frame.³ Finally, it is not an assessment of the extent to which women contributed to the construction of a united Italy, or a reflection on how different generations experienced the intertwining of the individual and collective dimensions within the multiple dynamics of national belonging.⁴ This *Storia* is something else: it summarises the most recent research on the Italian case, starting from women's and gender history and their interconnection with global history. This point of intersection is the result of the dialogue that Italian and foreign historians have cultivated over time and which, in each of the ten essays, restore the unique perspective of a long-delayed encounter.

Scholars have pointed out that this dialogue reformulated the concept of the nation-state, introducing new themes and questions.⁵ Salvatici's volume thus starts from a very precise awareness: the need to adopt a transnational perspective to be able to read women history and the history of Italy through them. All contributions demonstrate that this perspective makes it possible to identify networks and links between subjects (women) who are located in different places but jointly engaged in an action that derives from common demands and motivations. Through this same perspective, it is possible to trace the times, modalities and effects of the circulation of knowledge that determines the lives of women — and not only — at a political, economic and legal level. Lastly, the transnational perspective enables a reconsideration of the spatial dimension, read through the interweaving of different scales that go from the supranational via the local to the domestic sphere — that microcosm in which global dynamics cross personal needs and desires, anticipating (or imposing) transformations that are sometimes unpredictable. Focusing on people, practices and places means widening our gaze to include the experiences of individuals and groups, rethinking times and processes and, above all, challenging — once and for all — the presumed separation between the public and private spheres by revealing their problematic nature.

If this type of analysis shortens the methodological distance between global history and women's history, the various perspectives contained in the book introduce other categories that, over time, have been invested by a gender perspective: for example, those common to social history and cultural history, capable of rethinking periodisations, grasping transformations, identifying representations, exposing hierarchies and power relationships. As a result, it is possible to trace continuities and ruptures in Italian history that would other-

³ This was, instead, the aim of Perry Willson's *Italiane. Biografia del Novecento*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2011.

⁴ See Maria Teresa Mori et al. (eds.), *Di generazione in generazione. Le italiane dall'Unità a oggi*, Rome, Viella, 2014.

⁵ Elisabetta Bini, *Toward a Gendered World History? The Italian Case in Comparative Perspective*, in Teresa Bertilotti (ed.), *Women's History at the Cutting Edge*, Rome, Viella, 2020, pp. 79-95.

wise remain invisible, to identify control mechanisms that can be read differently and to follow perceptions and self-perceptions that change over time, even in unexpected ways.

Finally, as I have mentioned, the volume successfully engages in a dialogue with the present. Each essay starts from a historiographical question that concerns the present and, given its heuristic value, the processes that lead to the present and best illustrate it, whether they are related to emigration or nationalism, violence against women or the precariousness of work, gender identities or the definition of the political. The questions raised by these processes open the door to a variety of themes, which enrich the image of a national momentum that emerged in a context where nationalism was strong and imagined communities mobilised to create their own nation-states. As previous studies have shown, these communities — presenting themselves as homogeneous, exclusive and locked in their parental, heroic and sacrificial narratives — had a clearly gendered nature, being the result of a cultural construction also marked by a gender division.⁶ The discursive space of the nation, its symbolic constellations and its value systems imposed behaviours and role models on men and women in the name of normative moralism, which saw female citizens exclusively as wives and mothers, procreators and educators capable of transmitting the word of the nation.

What the latter really meant for Italian women is explained in Catia Papa's contribution on their interpretation of homeland and patriotism. The sacredness of the "motherland", abnegation and sacrifice in the name of the nation-family, and maternal martyrdom as the main expression of patriotic duty had conveyed a sense of belonging to their imagined community ever since the *Risorgimento*, fuelling their legal inferiority after Unification when the new civil code subordinated civil liberties to the control of men — be they fathers or husbands. The author observes that the homeland soon became one of the signs of the patriarchal order for those who, like Anna Maria Mozzoni, fought for women's liberation from an apparently unchanged condition of subalternity and subordination. Moreover, the homeland had an even more oppressive connotation for those who denounced the violence of colonial expansionism and the reconsideration of Italianness from an imperialistic perspective. Recalling the links that connected the struggle for emancipation with pacifism at an international level and describing the difficult issue of feminist orientalism, Papa analyses the tensions and contradictions that the theme of civilisation introduced into the feminist universe, shedding light on generational, political and cultural ruptures that disrupted the women's front with the Libyan war first, and the global conflict later. The ideology of motherhood and the maternal culture —

⁶ Alberto M. Banti, *L'onore della nazione. Identità sessuali e violenza nel nazionalismo europeo dal XVIII secolo alla Grande Guerra*, Turin, Einaudi, 2005; Idem, *La nazione del Risorgimento. Parentela, santità e onore alle origini dell'Italia unita*, Turin, Einaudi, 2000.

the foundations of the nation — now fixed women in a reproductive role, functional to a homeland that was a community of lineage and race and to a patriotism that preached national imperialism as the main route to state prestige.

This change in the meaning and role of motherhood is also at the heart of Vinzia Fiorino's essay, on the public space of women since 1848 when, arms in hand, they defended their membership of the nation that was being formed in the many places of conflict. Fiorino delves into the folds of post-Unification disappointment, highlighting the legal implications that trapped Italian women in the family institution and tracing the genesis of a movement aimed at claiming denied rights. The battle for the vote, the difficult relationship with political parties, the birth in 1881 of the *Lega promotrice degli interessi femminili* and the launch of a real movement, made up of associations rather than individuals, give a blurred image of a mobilisation that would gain relevance at the beginning of the new century, when different sensibilities and political paths focused on suffrage, at least for a while. It is, however, at the turn of the twentieth century that the role of motherhood emerges as a distinctive feature of a subject that is no longer — and not only — the guardian of the nation but indeed also of race. Fiorino explains how this change occurred at a time when the female body became the object of study for disciplines such as physiology and psychiatry, whose measurements gave substance to an inferiority described in terms of infantilism and minority. Furthermore, there was an overlap between women and the masses; one and the other were united by the excess that political institutions saw as an enemy to be defeated, or at least curbed. It is in this context that, at the beginning of the century and before being fragmented by the war, the movement reorganised itself. Regardless of the difficulties, ruptures and contradictions that accompanied the assertion of civil and political rights, Fiorino's analysis reveals the ability of women to give these rights a new meaning starting from a non-negotiable specificity: the female one. In other words, Italian feminist movements saw female subjectivity as 'non-negotiable',⁷ while the maternal role was considered to be able to create a social citizenship based on solidarity and cooperation. They thus aimed at helping and supporting the oppressed and the disenfranchised, focusing first and foremost on the dignity of the person: elements that evoked another political community and another form of civil action.

One of the merits of Salvatici's volume is that it manages to capture continuity and discontinuity over a long period and to explore the actions and emotions of women throughout the whole of national history. It is no surprise, then, that the themes mentioned so far are covered for the entire twentieth century and the authors search for the red threads that break and are reconnected, weaving a dense and complex web. One of these red threads is precisely

⁷ Vinzia Fiorino, *Lo spazio pubblico delle donne: suffragio, cittadinanza, diritti politici*, in S. Salvatici, *Storia delle donne nell'Italia contemporanea*, cit., p. 69.

feminism; the tensions that traverse it and the issues it addresses — from one century to another, from the nineteenth century to the present day — give it a plural dimension, while unforeseen events allow it to grow. This idea of unexpectedness and multiplicity enables Paola Stelliferi, on the one hand, to grasp the ‘many insurgencies’ that make up feminism and, on the other hand, to link women’s history with history in general, giving it greater complexity.⁸ As the author recalls, post-Unification Italian feminism had a multifaceted nature: egalitarian and intransigent in claiming the right to vote and to receive education, anti-militarist and pacifist in its commitment to building a culture of peace, and “practical” in taking on welfare and philanthropic activities. In any case, social motherhood represented fertile ground for discussion well beyond the liberal age, when it was fully exploited by the Fascist regime before being transmitted to Republican Italy. If women were confronted with the radical and totalitarian control of bodies and sexuality during the ‘long journey through Fascism’,⁹ in the 1970s, they embarked on a path of dismantling existing hierarchies, aided by debates and theories that were often imported from abroad and incorporated into a new process of women’s liberation. Perceiving itself as “different” from the feminisms of the past, the new feminism once again manifested itself in various forms and spaces; separatism and consciousness-raising, the “double militancy” in collectives and the groups of the extra-parliamentary Left, and the “politics of experience” constitute the various paths towards self-determination and freedom of the body. At this point, a process of ‘denationalising Italian women’¹⁰ began that was the result of a double break: with the legacy of Fascism, which controlled the body to safeguard the race, and with the Republican pact, which recognised equality in the public sphere but without going so far as to formalise women’s individual rights in the family. This paradigm shift, in which the — fundamental — theme of difference inserted itself, also took place at the international level, as feminism influenced the political agendas of governments to the point of becoming central even to that of the United Nations, which focused on women for a decade from 1975. Stelliferi recalls how the movement — at both the global and the national level — was now able to promote decisive reforms that, although they caused fractures, opened up a new era: the one that has lasted until the present and still largely remains to be studied. The analysed events are, therefore, characterised by “waves” and a “backwash” that complicate the task of writing Italian history, starting from margins that are not such and placing essential subjects and issues at the centre.

One of these is discussed by Anna Scattigno and concerns the relationship between Christianity, feminism and militancy, a complex theme that includes

⁸ Paola Stelliferi, *I femminismi dall’Unità a oggi*, in S. Salvatici, *Storia delle donne nell’Italia contemporanea*, cit., p. 82.

⁹ Victoria De Grazia, *Le donne nel regime fascista*, Padua, Marsilio, 1993, p. 38.

¹⁰ Liliana Ellena, *Frontiere della liberazione e snazionalizzazione delle italiane*, in M. T. Mori et al. (eds.), *Di generazione in generazione*, cit., p. 280.

other voices, paths and experiences in the broader analysis of the women's movement. Scattigno carefully examines the transitions and turning points in this relationship in order to identify new openings, growing challenges and setbacks along a path that is also marked by an exchange with contemporary international experiences. Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Christian feminism was shaped by a careful observation of the social changes that forced women from the Catholic, aristocratic and bourgeois elite to think about social solidarity, religious education, the cultural and intellectual promotion of women, freedom and progress. This attention is translated into different voices and positions that are at times censored, and at other times valorised, especially when they "convert" feminism to Christianity by forcing it back into the grasp of order and the family. Scattigno recalls some of the weapons used by the Church to stem the claims for political and social rights, like the journals and associations that animated the debate until the creation of the *Unione fra le donne cattoliche d'Italia* in 1909, an organisation set up 'in obedience to the hierarchy and the Church's guidelines',¹¹ which had to oppose the ideas and actions of emancipationists. Again, the First World War represented a turning point, epitomised by the birth of the *Gioventù femminile cattolica italiana*, entrusted by the pope with the task of re-Christianising not only women, but Italy as a whole. Scattigno's analysis highlights the confrontational attitude of Catholic women, first in the Resistance movement, then in the establishment of the Republic and subsequently in the period of reforms, when the youngest women in particular suffered from the restrictions on their bodies and sexuality. From the abandonment of the veil in church to the restlessness conveyed in letters sent to magazines, dissent created the basis for a different relationship with faith. Thus, a new story began for many of these women, one made up of militancy in trade unions, in the extra-parliamentary Left, in grassroots communities and in feminist groups and camps where practice and speech allowed for important contaminations, creating new identity paths and life trajectories. In this case, too, the links with different experiences and women from other countries reveal the extent of the change and show how more or less hidden connections operated in the depths, facilitating transformations that would otherwise have been unthinkable.

Inside and outside the domestic space

"Storia delle donne nell'Italia contemporanea" is a truly collective work; drawing on shared reflections and ideas, the essays talk to each other as they present issues, revisit old questions and develop analyses. This dialogue also

¹¹ Anna Scattigno, *Le forme della fede: cristianesimo, femminismi, militanza*, in S. Salvatici, *Storia delle donne nell'Italia contemporanea*, cit., p. 293.

emerges from the methodological choices made by the individual authors, who — in the continuous confrontation with the transactional dimension — question established notions by approaching different spaces and times from new angles.

Starting from the renewed interest in the gendered dimension of armed conflicts, in her own essay, Salvatici shows how women's experience of the two world wars profoundly changed the very notion of war. Rejecting the stereotypes and clichés that traditionally reserve heroism and the honour of arms for men, the author proposes an approach that seeks to overcome, on the one hand, the distinction between the battlefield and the home front and, on the other, the division between peacetime and wartime, in order to understand the upheaval of social structures, the redefinition of identities and the subjective and emotional experience of violence and uprooting from a gender perspective. In this regard, certain issues prove particularly relevant: the reconsideration of care work, which became a real profession as it was extended from the domestic sphere to the battlefield; the abandonment of one's home and land, which forced Italian women to enter into difficult contact with female refugees of other nationalities; experimenting a dramatic daily life in collective centres, factories and camps where hunger and poverty added to the harshness of the work; and the — often spontaneous — mobilisation in the name of peace and justice. If many (Italian but not only) women experienced these and other things during the First World War, after only a few decades they were confronted with yet other situations, when they were cast into an even more violent war. The massacres, deportations and mass rapes subjected women to new experiences that the author explores in their many facets, putting them in dialogue with women's protagonism in the Resistance, when they were once again forced into direct confrontation with violence. In this case, too, the long-term perspective allows us to delve into legacies and heritage in times of peace, both in the interwar period and in Republican Italy, when the Resistance experience — although "silenced" or neutralised as part of the restoration of traditional gender relations — allowed women to embark on new political paths.

Where the concept of war can be expanded thanks to the relational dimension in which gender is situated, other notions can be brought to the fore, starting from strategies, mediations and experiences that women lived or acted upon at different times and in different ways. One of these is mobility, which brings with it the possibility of interweaving scales of analysis, spaces of action and networks of relations capable of reconfiguring masculinity and femininity even in a context like Italy, which by its very position represents the intersection of European and global networks.¹² Women's migration is the focus of Alessandra Gissi's essay, which examines the local, national and supranational

¹² Cfr. Matteo Sanfilippo, Paola Corti (eds.), *Storia d'Italia. Annali 24. Migrazioni*, Turin, Einaudi, 2009.

connections and experiences of those who, from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, have moved to contexts other than their original ones. Transnational dynamics clearly emerge from Gissi's analysis; the networks and relationships that linked countries and continents reveal that women moved with the same freedom as men, a movement that reconfigured bodies, desires and knowledge and enabled them to embark on life projects that were never taken for granted. If migration is a constitutive element of Italian history, interpreting it through a gender lens allows us to introduce new elements into the analysis, such as women's protagonism, not only in creating their own migratory paths within vast geographical areas and the global labour market, but also in managing men's migratory projects (to which they often contributed economically, through dowries), their networks and money transfers, thanks to which they launched new economic activities. Whether they stayed or left, women affected by migration played a fundamental role, one very different from the passive and irrelevant role — compared to the vicissitudes of their male counterparts — that is generally ascribed to them. Gissi examines a range of migrant figures involved in forms of mobility of varying scope and duration: the *mondine* and embroiderers who, in the nineteenth century, travelled internally and not always permanently; the Venetian nannies, who after the opening of the Suez Canal moved to Alexandria to take up service there with families of technicians and civil servants; the home workers who, between 1880 and 1930, set up flourishing economic activities in the United States, fostering the creation and development of the Italian-American community; the female intellectuals fleeing anti-Semitic persecution, who clashed with the resistance of an essentially male academic world; the hotel maids and typists who, from the 1950s onwards, had to endure the harshness of a clandestine life in Switzerland, with the consequent impossibility of family reunification and poor integration; and finally, the women workers who left the South during the economic boom for urban centres in the North, where their state of isolation and subordination usually worsened.

The heterogeneous universe of these women allows us, on the one hand, to explore their impact on the transformation of emerging and declining societies and, on the other, to analyse more closely the nexus between public and private space that the migration experience inevitably highlights, not only from the point of view of agency but also from that of oppression. As Laura Schettini shows, violence against women in migration contexts is indeed very common; the domestic space reconstructed by families who have moved to the United States or from southern to northern Italy often turns into a place where external interventions that could block or sanction this violence fail to penetrate. If, in the first case, the need to safeguard the image of a universe (i.e. that of the Italian family) that was key to the redefinition of the emigrants' identity in the New World meant keeping quiet — then as well as later — about those abuses, in the second case, this silence stemmed from the full legitimisa-

tion of violence against women from a legal, social and cultural point of view. In discussing this topic, Schettini reconstructs the framework of this legitimisation by starting from the body/family/sexuality nexus, the junction of a form of violence that becomes gender violence as soon as it brings into play ‘certain beliefs, expectations and claims — codified and deposited over time — relating to the roles of the two genders in society’.¹³ These roles emerged fully in the nineteenth century, against the backdrop of a nation whose driving force was the family and where the honour of the homeland coincided with the middle-class man’s honour and respectability, which were based on the control of women’s sexuality and reproductive capacity. Within this ideological framework, legislative and regulatory devices were applied that “confiscated” female sexuality, entrusting it to the logic of the state and the family. Here, the *ius corrigendi* allowed men to violently exercise their control in an increasingly inaccessible domestic space, thanks also to the development of a specific culture of privacy, typical of bourgeois Europe. From this perspective, honour killing — like reparatory marriage — seems a useful tool to strengthen an unbalanced power relationship, in which asymmetries persisted at least until the last decades of the twentieth century. After all, if the Court of Cassation rejected the corrective power of husbands over their wives in 1956, a power never been sanctioned by law, it was only in 1996 that a law was passed equating sexual violence with a crime no longer against morality and decency but against the person. This measure was the result of long-term feminist struggles and debates, which in subsequent decades led to other legislative texts, like that of 2021 on sexual orientation discrimination, opening the door to new rights and forms of recognition. The fact is that, now as then, the body and sexuality remain at the centre of representations that affect not only the legal system but also social constructions and hierarchies as well as their transformation over time.

Emmanuel Betta dwells on this aspect in his analysis of the theme of sexuality in the context of the nation-state and the power of biopolitics to shape and discipline the body of the individual and the community. Focusing on some of the issues already mentioned by Fiorino, Betta studies the role of positivist science in naturalising the male/female difference, deriving functions and identities from the latter. The author warns that, in reality, the production of new knowledge about the female body also, and unexpectedly, promoted awareness among women; thanks to the new information, the latter could, for example, better control their fertility. Yet, sexuality long remained a terrain of regulation, capable of legitimising female subordination from a moral and legal point of view. In fact, the longest debated issue after Unification was prostitution, considered detrimental to the body of the nation, which was to be safe-

¹³ Laura Schettini, *La violenza maschie contro le donne*, in S. Salvatici, *Storia delle donne nell’Italia contemporanea*, cit., p. 136.

guarded from any form of degeneration. In this sense, the Italian case offers a unique perspective in terms of transnational exchanges and relations, given the impact that Cesare Lombroso's theories on prostitutes had in European scientific circles of the time. Considered a sign of female atavism, prostitution allowed the criminalisation of women, who were judged inferior and "criminal" because of their incomplete evolution. Social behaviour was thus derived from biology, while nature became more generally the constraint and basis of individual and collective choices. The exclusively reproductive function of the female body found another prominent supporter in the Catholic Church, and the religious discourse soon overlapped with the secular one, reinforcing the deterministic approach and the idea of reproduction as a biological end. If we were again to read this theme in terms of the red thread that ties together different epochs, we could not avoid seeing the continuity of the conflict between female self-determination and the highest collective purpose. In the pronatalist policies of the Fascist regime, this meant exalting the maternal dimension, as with the inclusion of the crime of abortion in the Rocco Code in 1930, making it an offence against the integrity of the race. The same code introduced a ban on the sale and promotion of contraceptives, which the Republican system inherited and only abolished in 1971. As I have mentioned, the first ruptures on the sexual liberation front occurred at this stage, while it is only more recently that sexuality has been the object of further reconsiderations that, once again, affect gender, identity and their relationship with science.

The world of labour

A book that aims to read the political, social and cultural events of contemporary Italy from a new perspective would be incomplete without a discussion of the theme of work, both within and outside the domestic space and in its interaction with practices of care. The essays that focus on this theme again seek to redefine the relationship between public and private space and to read the relationship between the various spheres of collective and individual action in the interstices of the system. Here, too, the domestic space is central to understanding the peculiar dynamics of women's work, which in the context of the family can be fully explored from the point of view of consumption, a subject that is beginning to be considered as a specific historiographical field,¹⁴ where gender can become a lens through which to read, for example, the separation between political economy and domestic economy, given that the latter is usually placed at the margins, in the unconditional realm

¹⁴ As Jonathan Morris reminds us, in *Una via italiana al consumismo?*, "Italia contemporanea", 2022, n. 299, pp. 169-188.

of women. Focusing on Italy, Enrica Asquer analyses the literature that, starting from the Unification, sought to educate the mother-wife to conscious and informed consumption, as part of that pedagogy of the homeland that aimed at creating female citizens in a sphere in which they would subsequently be forced to emerge, in the dark times of war. In domestic work, consumption was primarily about satisfying the needs that were managed by women, who learnt to enhance their skills. It was no longer only competence and caution that characterised this practice in the Fascist *Ventennio*, when ambivalent gender roles emerged — from the prolific housewife to the emancipated woman — and women were projected into a modern urban and living space. Moreover, consumption models changed, marketing strategies were refined and the politicisation of the commercial sphere overlapped with the commercialisation of politics, reinforcing the paternalistic and conservative model of female consumption.¹⁵ After the Second World War and in the years of the economic “miracle”, the international context contributed greatly to this situation, redefining domestic space and the relationship between women and consumption. Asquer shows that the American model asserted itself even in Italy, changing the image of well-being by linking it to freedom of choice and the modernity of a practice centred on the housewife-consumer. At this moment in history, the latter acquired visibility, exalting the professional dimension of “family” work by representing it as interclass, modern and a generator of new values that actually served to control social anxieties and fill the dangerous empty time opened up for women thanks to the new commodities (i.e. household appliances). Even the reactions to this new model can be read from a global perspective; the feminists’ contestation of a manipulative commercial culture stemmed precisely from the interweaving of analyses and debates developed in distant contexts but unanimously aimed at dismantling consolidated practices and representations. In this regard, a reading of domestic work as a ‘fundamental, albeit invisible, prerequisite for the accumulation of capital’¹⁶ also emerged in Italy, allowing some feminist groups to join the international network for the recognition of wages for housewives and to reinforce the supra-national connections of the Italian women’s movement.

This brings us to the theme of the invisibility of women’s work, a constant feature and a paradigm capable of revealing how the pretence of women’s absence in the labour market has served, over time, to fuel a more general devaluation of the dignity of work not only in relation to women but also to men. This nexus is addressed in Alessandra Pescarolo’s essay, which picks

¹⁵ Cfr. Bianca Gaudenzi, *Fascismi in vetrina. Pubblicità e modelli di consumo nel Ventennio e nel Terzo Reich*, Rome, Viella, 2023.

¹⁶ Enrica Asquer, *Tra casa e mercato: genere, consumo e lavoro familiare*, in S. Salvatici, *Storia delle donne nell’Italia contemporanea*, cit., p. 208.

up issues that have already been investigated for the modern age.¹⁷ Pescarolo raises a specific question concerning the gap between a ‘strong commitment to work’ and the ‘disavowal of women’s identity as workers’.¹⁸ If the widespread tendency to replace the notion of ‘lavoratrici’ with the different term ‘donne che lavorano’ still shows a propensity to prioritise gender identity over women’s working identity,¹⁹ the latter seems to be constantly put under pressure by mechanisms that are also present in the Italian case. The author recalls the various reasons for women’s exclusion from the world of work in the post-Unification era: in the first place, subjection to their husbands and the domestic space, but also positivist-inspired forms of protection that considered physical labour a limit to the reproductive function of “fragile” bodies. If this situation reinforced the model of the male breadwinner and, consequently, the ideal of the working man, free and aware of his prerogatives, processes of industrialisation and urbanisation made the picture more fragmented as they revealed the — diversified, depending primarily on the context and social class — presence of women in the labour market. Women workers and peasants, maids, teachers and nurses inhabited a heterogeneous universe within a patriarchal order that set limits and promoted well-defined models, and which belittled and devalued their commitment. Pescarolo describes the changes brought about by the First World War, when the deployment of men broke down many boundaries; she investigates the symbolic and material regression of working women under Fascism, when they also suffered a heavy setback in terms of remuneration; she explores the ambiguities and distortions of the Republican era, starting with the Constitution, which subordinated women’s work to their ‘essential family function’; finally, she recalls the social, political and legislative changes that have mitigated female discrimination over time but without achieving gender equality. As many have noted, the difficult transition from the male breadwinner model to that of the dual breadwinner continues to weigh heavily — a transition that would challenge entrenched imbalances and inequalities but also the maternalist paradigm in all its various ramifications.²⁰

As will be clear by now, a large portion of the book is dedicated to the theme of maternalism, especially because of its centrality with regard to the relationship between women and the state and the development of a welfare state that finds its identity in the protection of maternity. Elisabetta Vezzosi focuses on this aspect, starting with an examination of the creation of the

¹⁷ See, for example, Anna Bellavitis, *Il lavoro delle donne nelle città dell’Europa moderna*, Rome, Viella, 2016.

¹⁸ Alessandra Pescarolo, *Lavoro e riconoscimento: un binomio mobile*, in S. Salvatici, *Storia delle donne nell’Italia contemporanea*, cit., pp. 165-166.

¹⁹ Deborah Simonton, *Women workers. Working women*, in Idem (ed.), *The Routledge History Of Women in Europe since 1700*, London-New York, Routledge, 2006, pp. 134-175.

²⁰ Marian van der Klein et al. (eds), *Maternalism Reconsidered: Motherhood, Welfare and Social Policy in the Twentieth Century*, New York-Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2012.

Cassa nazionale di maternità in 1910. Its establishment, which was (partially) the result of feminist mobilisation, followed a period of debates, exchanges of information and comparisons of ideas and projects involving emancipationist women in Italy and abroad, all committed to the struggle for the expansion of social rights. This network of connections, made possible by travel and publications, exposed the Italian movement to an international dimension with important repercussions, turning the protection of motherhood into a key issue of women's political action. Vezzosi demonstrates that the culture of maternal and child care that developed in this sphere was absorbed by the social policies of Fascism, which exploited its potential by bending it to its own ends. The birth in 1925 of the Opera nazionale per la protezione della maternità e dell'infanzia went in this direction, while various legislative decrees were passed to protect women workers, physically and morally, even if the regime tended to exclude them from the labour market. Despite many ambiguities, the attempt to rationalise the maternity assistance system was inherited by the Republic; the actions taken by the Case della madre e del bambino across the peninsula were irregular and not without contradictions. The author traces the development of legal interventions in the issue from the 1950s onwards, showing how other institutional subjects (the EU, first and foremost) entered the scene and put pressure on a process of transformation that, in many ways, is still ongoing. Vezzosi ends her analysis on the national/international level as she recalls recent welfare policies, the work-life balance issue, the relationship between reconciliation policies and the increase in female employment. In this new context, the crisis of the maternalist paradigm emerges clearly, 'inadequate' as it is to represent 'the key to interpreting a changing reality'.²¹

Conclusion

Twenty years have passed since Simonetta Soldani highlighted the 'undefined profile' of contemporary women's history, describing the 'permanent difficulty' of research on the female universe 'to interact positively with each other, to create a "force field" that enhances and circulates its potential and results'.²² As the book edited by Salvatici shows, since then, the number of studies on this topic has increased, the approaches have become more cautious and the distances have shrunk, while the interactions, exchanges and areas for discussion and comparison have increased. This transformation is reflected in the essays gathered in Salvatici's volume, which testify to the solidity of the rese-

²¹ Elisabetta Vezzosi, *La maternità: dall'assistenza al welfare*, in S. Salvatici, *Storia delle donne nell'Italia contemporanea*, cit., p. 234.

²² Simonetta Soldani, *L'incerto profilo degli studi di storia contemporanea*, in Anna Rossidoria (ed.), *A che punto è la storia delle donne in Italia*, Rome, Viella, 2003, p. 69.

arch, on the one hand, and their place in a field of enquiry with extended boundaries, on the other hand. A similar development reveals two further aspects: the confidence with which the authors retrace — in their contributions — the outcome of their own reflections, and the potential contained in these trajectories, capable of generating new questions and paths. This is precisely what “Storia delle donne nell’Italia contemporanea” is: a ground on which various encounters have taken place and from which new stories can emerge.

Translated by Andrea Hajek

