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Recommended Citation

Lee, Ben, "Food Politics and Women in Fascist Italy". *The Trinity Papers (2011 - present)* (2023).
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Food Politics and Women in Fascist Italy

Ben Lee

Italian cuisine is one of the most well-known, and well-cooked cuisines in the world. In seemingly every country across all reaches of the globe, it is possible to find some sort of Italian, or Italian style restaurant. What is interesting, however, is that the cuisine which many people consider to be Italian has truly only been developed within the past one hundred years, for the most part. Many favorite Italian dishes are much more modern than many may think, and many of these dishes were created during the fallout of the Second World War, and the fall of Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime. During their stint in power, Mussolini and the fascists took complete control of the Italian state, allowing the national fascist government to have wide reaching control into many aspects of people's daily lives. Practicing government influence in traditionally private fields such as professional sports and the fashion industry, the fascist government also took great steps to control the state's food policy. This meant the state controlled what was eaten and when it was eaten, along with ways in which food should be prepared and produced. While these policies certainly affected all Italians and their gastronomical tastes, these policies had a poignant effect on women during this period. Though women were actively subordinated to men throughout fascist Italian society, food policy played an active role in said submission. It is not enough to simply say that fascism subordinated women because it was simply a part of their ideology—there has to be a reason for such, and their food policy was one of these multiple reasons. Though enhanced by other societal factors, fascist food policy simultaneously cemented Italian women's subordinate position in Italian society. This was done through autarkic propaganda campaigns, the promotion of rice as a grain substitute, as well as the 'rationalization movement', which intended to modernize kitchen spaces in order to improve food autarky.

Before discussing the specific food-related policies which aided in the subordination of Italian women under fascism, it is important to specifically determine the regime's desired social position for

women to make it more clear to see how the food policies described later contributed to this campaign. As most people already realize, the fascist ideology as well as the regime which legitimated it is staunchly sexist, and anti-feminist. The regime did not desire for Italian women to achieve any significant level of personal autonomy or independence. This was confirmed through various legal as well as propagandic measures which incrementally restricted the rights and privileges of Italian women under fascism. For example, on September 5, 1938, the regime, but more specifically Mussolini himself issued a decree which mandated that all Italian employers reduce their number of female employees by ten percent (de Grazia 166). This action clearly demonstrates the regime's goals for the lives of women. With a large number of Italian women forced out of work via this decree, they would be forced to remain in the only other space they possessed—their private homes. Furthermore, with much more availability at home, women would be able to spend more time out of the day completing domestic tasks such as general housework, cleaning, and, significant within this context, cooking. To push this even further, Mussolini himself has commented on the status of women, saying that “Women must obey...In our state, she must not count” (Mussolini 1931, as cited in de Grazia 234). This quotation relates Italian women to the domestic sphere, yet a bit indirectly. Specifically, when considering the use of the word “obey”, it must be considered to whom this is referring to. Being that this is quote from Mussolini, obviously women must first obey his word, and thus by extension the word of the state. Given the regime's extreme patriarchal stance, however, reveals a second layer to this term. In this sense, to the fascists, a woman must also obey her husband in order to act within the guise of the state. The husband, however, only holds any active authority in a single sphere—that of his private home. Therefore, for a woman to “obey” in fascist Italy she must both obey the word of Mussolini and the state, and the word of her husband within her home. As such, fascist ideology pushes women deeper into the domestic sphere, since she must spend a significant amount of time in the domestic sphere in order to conform in the mode the regime desired.

As soon Mussolini became Prime Minister of Italy following the March on Rome in 1922, he shifted Italian economic policy to focus solely on self-sufficiency, otherwise known as autarky

(Helstotksy 63). Though practically unfeasible for Italy, Mussolini and the regime centered food policy on this principle, centering food related actions on achieving this objective. This unattainable goal greatly changed the food landscape in Italy, affecting both what Italians ate as well as how much they would pay for various food items. For example, municipal fascist government leaders were given full authority to levy price controls (called *calmiere*) on various foods, in order to combat rising food prices following the First World War (Helstotsky 68). To achieve the goal of autarky, however, the regime shifted its focus to promoting the production of various crops and other food items which could already be produced domestically in Italy. The regime produced propaganda which was distributed to the masses, encouraging the production and consumption of these types of foods (Garvin). For the regime, however, the most important food item to be produced domestically was rice (Helstotksy 79). Favored as a substitute for wheat, which was not able to be grown at a sufficient scale domestically, the regime heavily promoted the production and consumption of rice as an important means to inch closer to the autarky end. To do so, the National Rice Board (Ente Nazionale Risi) was founded in 1928 to distribute rice propaganda and to promote knowledge about rice farming to people all over the country (Helstotksy 79). The group, both on the National Day of Rice Propaganda as well as others, would travel the country by train and distribute samples of rice and cooked rice dishes to people in various cities and towns (Helstotsky 79). What connected this campaign most strongly to the feminine position, however, was the distribution of recipe pamphlets at National Rice Board events. These small pieces of paper had a great impact on the social position of women in Fascist Italy.

At these propaganda laden events that the National Rice Board hosted in order to encourage greater rice consumption, it was common for there to be people distributing recipe pamphlets (called *ricettari* in Italian) to people collecting the samples of rice. These pamphlets were specifically designed to be for women. This is firstly shown through the method of their distribution. These *ricettari* were commonly distributed by the *Fasci Femminili*, a Fascist Party women's group (Garvin, "Ricettari" 117). Before even considering the content of the pamphlets themselves, it is important to consider this method

of distribution. By leaving it to women to distribute these, the regime is implying that their content is related to their social 'job'—otherwise, why would they be tasked with the distribution? To continue, in her article "Fascist foodways: *Ricettari* as propaganda for grain production and sexual reproduction" Professor Diana Garvin explores the societal implication that these recipe pamphlets had on women living under fascism. Speaking to the relationship between these pamphlets and women, she says that "small and light, these stapled leaflets could be easily rolled up and stuck in an apron pocket. Portability this insured that these documents could cross the threshold from the public rally to the private kitchen" (Garvin, "Ricettari" 113). Here, the relationship between these pamphlets and women becomes clear. Their small, portable design already spoke to the position of women under fascism—the domestic head of the house who completes all of the household duties. Being able to fit the recipe pamphlet into a kitchen apron indirectly encouraged the women who received them to conform to this mold, as they were distributed by a government agency. Through their size, the regime was encouraging women to use them actively, by cooking the recipes that they contained. By doing so, Italian women would spend more time in the kitchen cooking, and thus spend more time in the home completing domestic work. This is how this food policy subordinated women—through cooking, women would remove themselves from public life and establish themselves as domestic workers who stay at the home (the desired fascist female identity). Furthermore, while passively encouraging women to fulfill this desired domestic role, these *ricettari* also specifically encouraged the cooking of autarkic Italian foods. Obviously, since the majority of these were distributed by the National Rice Board, for the most part, these pamphlets dealt with the cooking of rice dishes. Apart from rice, though, these *ricettari* would feature other autarkic items (usually produce) to be used in simple recipes. Because of this, these recipe pamphlets served two goals of the regime—on the one hand, they indirectly encouraged women to become more domestic through their coordinated distribution, and, on the other hand, encouraged more cooking of autarkic foods. These were both goals of the regime, and were both affected by the distribution of the *ricettari*.

To achieve autarky, the fascists had to be able to provide a domestic grain or other staple food product which could be grown at such a scale within Italy to feed the entire population. Given that wheat was not abundantly growing in Italy, the regime turned towards the promotion of production and consumption of rice (Helskotoksy 79). However, in order to produce rice on such a large scale, there became a need for an expanded agricultural labor force. The regime decided to combat this issue through the proliferation of *mondine*, or female rice farmers (Garvin, “Melodic Resistance”). At this point in history, Italian domestic women did already complete some agricultural work, but it would be done on a case-by-case basis in order to satisfy household needs (Garvin, “Melodic Resistance” 379). Following the new need for rice production, this status quo changed. As part of their work in promoting the production and consumption of rice, the National Rice Board produced many baseless claims as to reasons why women are better rice farmers than men, thus encouraging more women to begin rice farming (Garvin, “Melodic Resistance” 379). These included declarations that “only women had the patience for weeding, that their bodies were lighter and more agile...the fingers were more delicate”(Garvin, “Melodic Resistance” 379) among other unfounded arguments. These statements were not supported by any scientific evidence, and were used by the regime to legitimate the subordination of women into this position as something positive. Though the regime promoted the *mondine* as an occupation which was suited for women and would highlight their ‘biological’ strengths, the position in fact further pushed women away from autonomy and closer to full domestic servitude. During the annual *monda*, or weeding season, these female *mondine* became completely removed from the rest of society, solely devoting time to working in the fields. Additionally, due to generalized anti-feminism, these women were on average paid about half of the wage of a comparable male farmer (Garvin, “Melodic Resistance” 379). This further pushed these women further and further away from being able to achieve autonomy and relative independence, and much closer to being fully controlled and subordinated by the ideals of the regime.

Interestingly, this feature of the regime also worked to not only subordinate women in society, but also to shape them into the ideal fascist women—women that conformed to Mussolini’s vision of the

donna madre, a woman, who, according to Victoria de Grazia in her book *How Fascism Ruled Women*, was “national, rural, floridly robust, tranquil, and prolific” (de Grazia 73). Through their work in the rice fields, the *mondine* became nationalized, as the work they were doing was presented as being work which was destined to sustain the whole of Italy—the work they were doing was for the good of the nation, thus they were also national women. As a natural consequence of the settings in which they did their work, the *mondine* also became inherently rural. Pushing more women into the rice fields and away from urban centers, they became characterized much closer to the *donna madre*, and closer to the feminine lifestyle that Mussolini and the party encouraged. By becoming closer to the idealized *donna madre* through the nature of their work in the rice fields, the *mondine* became inherently subordinated. Though presented by regime as something to be idealized and respected, in reality the *donna madre* is a woman who is unable to act on her own volition, and is permanently bound to a lower social class without her own consent. Because of this, the rhetoric surrounding the *donna madre* as something which is virtually ‘liberating’ to Italian women is a farse. Rather than permitting women to act out of self-determination, the regime specifically guided and pushed women closer and deeper into the domestic sphere through their work in the rice paddies as *mondine*. As such, this made urban, intellectual women (the fascist enemy) increasingly more rare as the years went on.

While for the most part fascist food policy dealt with food products themselves, there was also influence from the regime on related products and concepts. For example, the regime took much effort in attempting to reform how Italian kitchens were set up and designed, for maximum efficiency. In the context of the rest of their food policy, this goal is in line. The regime believed that, in order to achieve full autarky, kitchen spaces would need to be designed in a manner which would provide for the most efficient cooking of food, in order to save food and thus have more to feed all Italians (Lo 110). This became known later as the Household Rationalization Movement (Lo 110). As with other facets of the fascist food policy, this movement indirectly subordinated women, as it pushed them further into the domestic sphere, and farther away from achieving personal autonomy or independence. What is most

interesting about this movement, however, is the many foreign influences which helped to create and shape it. For the most part, ideas for the better design of kitchen spaces were taken from Germany and the United States (Lo 110). This is a bit ironic when considering the rest of fascist ideology, which always stressed the importance of domestic knowledge and domestic products (autarky). While certainly ironic, this type of ideological contradiction is not uncommon from within the regime. There are many other instances of this, where the regime explicitly contradicts its own dictated ideology to meet practical goals. Looking at influences from Germany, for instance, was the idea of the *Kockkuche* (cooking kitchen in English) (Lo 115). This was the notion that the kitchen should be only used for cooking, and nothing else (Lo 115). To this point, some people would have used kitchens for other activities, like bathing and eating (Lo 115). This idea was embraced by the fascist regime, as it allowed for a space to be dedicated solely for food production, and thus the production of food to improve Italian autarky. It was also received as a structure which would provide women, the heads of the domestic sphere, a space to efficiently cook food, in turn allowing her more time to attend to other domestic tasks expected of fascist women. Furthermore, an efficient kitchen design relieved Italian women of the daily struggles of producing food for a whole family (due to inefficient design), therefore encouraging them to spend more time cooking in the kitchen. This, like the other aspects discussed, kept women in the home for more time during the day, and further away from the urban, modern life which the regime despised. As such, this policy effectively subordinated women further.

Looking to influences from the United States next, the regime took much from Christine Frederick, an American domestic scientist (Lo 112). As an editor of multiple American domestic magazines at the time, she provided the regime with ways in which kitchens could be modernized to promote efficiency and to save food (Lo 112). Her reasoning, though, was specifically directed through the female lens, claiming that the work she did was to benefit the work of Italian women, and to make their domestic lives much easier. For example, Frederick created a design for an efficient kitchen which was displayed at the International Congress of Home Economics, held in Rome (Lo 112). Included in this

schematic are lines which show the path the person cooking should take between appliances in order to maximize efficiency (Fig. 1) (Lo 112).

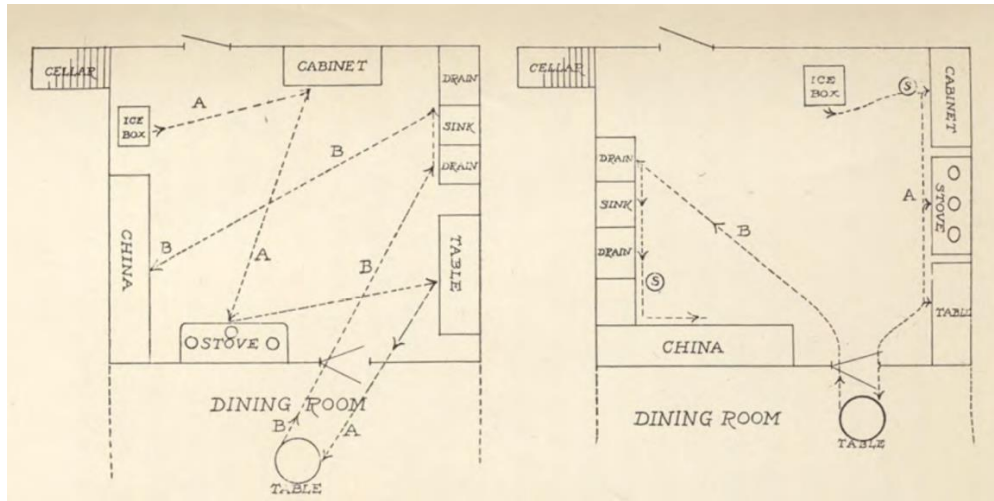


Figure 1: Efficient Kitchen Model, drawn by Christine Frederick. Source: Christine Frederick, *The New Housekeeping Efficiency Studies in Home Management* (New York: Doubleday, 1913), no page number.

In this diagram, the section on the right shows an efficient kitchen setup, while the section on the left shows the inefficient model. This model was embraced by the regime as a design which would improve cooking efficiency, and thus improve autarky, since food would be consumed and prepared in the most efficient possible ways. By doing this, food preparation would become much more streamlined across the country, allowing for less food to be wasted and not consumed across the board. This then would leave more food available for all Italians, allowing autarky to become closer to a reality. While this was the overall goal of this campaign, it is the rhetoric surrounding these projects which adds to the fascist subordination of women, however it does not appear to do so on the surface level. Maria Diez Gasca, an Italian domestic scientist who brought the work of Frederick to Italians (translating her book *The New Housekeeping* into Italian) claimed that “a woman who managed her household professionally and efficiently had successfully broken down gender barriers. In this sense, she asserted that household rationalization empowered women and elevated women’s status in society” (Lo 123). It is clear that on the surface, this selection reads as something which viewed the household rationalization movement as

positive for women. However, it is important to note the perspective from which this quote was given. By speaking of the “[breaking] down of gender barriers”, she is referring in the context of the ideology of the regime, meaning that the women are breaking such barriers by remaining in the domestic sphere, and in this case spending their time creating and utilizing efficient kitchen spaces, for the good of the regime. They are breaking down barriers in the sense that they are assuming the desired social position of women to the fascists. For example, to Gasca and others, a truly ‘liberated’ woman was one who would work diligently in a space such as the one designed by Frederick, and not spend their time doing as they pleased or passing time outside of the domestic realm. In this sense, to Gasca and others, through the use of these spaces women were liberating themselves from a life of choice, and into a life which has been chosen for them. The term ‘liberated’ becomes used in this backwards sense because of the regime’s idealized life for women—one which to contemporary readers presents itself as inherently backwards, and certainly not free. It is this pre-selected life which the regime desired for women, and they advanced these goals through the promotion of spaces such as these redesigned, efficient kitchens.

Fascist food policy was far-reaching, and indirectly encompassed many aspects of Italian society, other than solely the production and consumption of food products. Influences in other food related spheres such as that of kitchen design and the distribution of recipe pamphlets were also made to aid in reaching the regime’s intended goals for the world of food—that of achieving full self-sufficiency, or autarky. As Italian women were already associated with the domestic sphere through the rhetoric of Mussolini and other fascist officials, food policy became a natural means by which to continue this trend, and thus push more and more women into this way of life. By encouraging (and indirectly forcing) women to spend the majority of their time on domestic and food work, women would have less of a chance to present themselves in the public sphere, and thus had less of a chance of becoming the independent, urban woman which the regime attempted to restrict. The fact that other, seemingly unrelated policies of the regime also affected women in this way suggest the importance of this to the regime as a whole. The fact that the regime attempted to subordinate women both directly and indirectly,

such as through food related policies suggests that the regime may have viewed women as a threat to their power, and one which needed to be restrained in as many means as possible. As such, this threat would be neutralized. Through both explicit rhetoric claiming the inferior societal position of women in comparison to men, coupled with food policy among others, the regime intended to subordinate women in many different aspects of daily life. If women did not exist as a threat to the power of the regime, why would they create so many policies and structures which removed this threat? Obviously they were considered a threat to the fascist order, one which was constructed entirely of men. Returning to food policy, the regime took substantial measures to radicalize the production and consumption of Italian food products in order to reach the regime's goal of autarky. Women were intentionally wrapped up in these creations, as they were already inherently connected to food production due to their fascist representation as domestic servants. It is now clear that these policies further pushed Italian women into this role of domestic servitude, and further away from the possibility of personal autonomy and independence. Additionally, this reveals that many policies of Mussolini's totalitarian regime had much greater implications for Italy and its people than would have appeared on the surface.

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