How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945 by Victoria de Grazia
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the attraction of a significant part of the Milanese working class to a certain kind of revolutionary extremism. Arturo Labriola’s syndicalists briefly captured control of the Milanese organization, then Mussolini found support there, and, finally, after the war Milan provided a base for Amadeo Bordiga’s Left faction within the Italian Communist party until Antonio Gramsci purged the local section in 1924.

This fine book is a valuable contribution to the history of the Italian working class. Only through richly detailed studies of this sort can a general history of the Italian working class be written.

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This book is about how fascism ruled women and how women experienced it. Work, sex, leisure, family, motherhood, culture, politics, and consciousness are among the topics discussed. Even more than an excellent and broad survey, it is an extremely intelligent and interpretatively ambitious social history of fascism, understood as ideology, law, and government.

However, one looks in vain for the interpretative key; de Grazia not only does not offer one—she shows clearly that such a key does not exist. Though a policy toward women was crucial to fascism, that policy was riddled with contradictions. Furthermore, these contradictions were inherent in the nature of the regime, which was perpetually torn between the demands of modernity and the desire to reimpose traditional authority.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, in “traditional” prefascist Italy women worked, went out, and participated in politics. As elsewhere, in the wake of World War I Italian women expected to get suffrage. Socialist trade unions, leagues, and chambers of labor had the largest following of women in any labor movement in Europe. Women comprised almost half the total industrial labor force and one-third of the country’s total employed population. Fascism, by abolishing all elections, disbanding all organization, and legally limiting women’s access to the job market, represented a step back.

Moreover, fascist ideology took it as axiomatic that women and men were different by nature; fascist government, de Grazia says, “politicized this difference to the advantage of males and made it a cornerstone of an especially repressive, comprehensive new system for defining female citizenship, for governing women’s sexuality, wage labor and social participation” (7). But fascism’s vision of female roles was dualistic and contradictory: As “reproducers of the race” women were to embody traditional values; as patriotic citizens, they were to be combative and public.
The regime’s policy was at its most contradictory when it came to working-class women. Fascism wanted a low-wage (female) labor force, yet sought to secure the market for male heads of households. It wanted women out of the work force and back at home; yet, in the interest of the race, it had to protect women who worked. Thus, Mussolini’s government was the first in Italy to make family values central to the art of statecraft. But the purpose of Mussolini’s pro-natalist policy, admitted with brutal frankness, was to give more soldiers to the Fatherland. Legal protection of working mothers was in many ways pathbreaking (for example, pregnancy was treated as “involuntary unemployment” rather than as a disability or illness), but it was, in Robert Moeller’s term, a “discriminatory protection”: It discouraged employers from hiring women and encouraged women to leave the work force in the years of childbearing. In its essence, it was profoundly anti-feminist.

On other levels, legal discrimination was flagrant. The famed Rocco’s Codes, formulated between 1926 and 1931, included rape and seduction of minor females among “crimes against honor”—the fathers’ honor, that is. Sexual bias and outright discrimination against professional and manual female work intensified during the Depression, when unemployment among men was high. For example, Gentile’s reform of the educational system barred women from being school principals as well as from teaching in certain fields (including Latin, history, and philosophy). Fascist law excluded women from those positions that involved “the exercise of public judicial authority, political rights or power, or the military defence of the state.” Even the tertiary sector and the bureaucracy, which elsewhere were being feminized, in Italy were virilized: Legal quotas limited women’s access to office jobs, preferment went to male heads of household in the concorsi, and unequal pay was offered for equal work.

How did women cope? All in all, not too well. Fascism was not a totalitarian regime; for one, it had to share the governing of souls with the Catholic church, its powerful ally cum competitor. Nor were women passive subjects or hapless victims; de Grazia herself taught us, in her previous study of the fascist dopo-lavoro, that subalterns rarely are. Fortunately, the author does not indulge in an agonizing exploration of the recently popular “victims or coperpetrators” scenario. She shows how women attempted to use the spaces open to them, to exploit the policy’s contradictions, and to carry out some kind of indirect emancipatory discourse. They were protagonists who made choices. But the regime’s actions were so overwhelming at so many levels that women’s choices were very limited. On a political level, it was only in the sphere of social assistance that a woman could find a function; there, fascist and fellow-traveling women offered voluntary work in the hope of widening women’s influence and winning them citizenship rights.

On the less-formal level, gender solidarity networks existed even across class. Catholicism’s success in the interwar decades lay mostly in the
bonds of solidarity it fostered among women. But de Grazia is careful not to sentimentalize gender bonds. Class and family solidarities remained solid. Working-class women stood by their men, who were subject to outright political discrimination. Class antagonism was stronger than gender solidarity when working women’s homes were “visited” by snooping fascist visitatrici. To complicate the issue further, fascism exploited these tensions, playing young women against the generations of prewar feminists, and family loyalties against class allegiances.

*How Fascism Ruled Women* is written with verve, humor, and compassion. There are some real gems in it, such as the story of the *mondine*, rice workers of the Po valley, who were courted with sandwiches and powdered milk by virile fascists terrified of what the *mondine* might regard as true virility—namely, standing up to drastic wage dashing. What makes the reading even more fascinating is the switching of interpretative modes according to the many topics examined. In discussing fascism’s social policies and labor legislation, the author uses a stringent class analysis; in examining the impact of the new commercial mass culture, she resorts to semantic analysis. But such versatility has a price: The book is uneven. Some topics—for example, the impact of mass culture—are carefully thought through; others, like the subject of resistance, get too hasty a treatment.

The chapter on mass culture, entitled “Going Out,” opens with a scene in a café, a vital institution in the 1930s and a quintessential site of male culture. A typical evening scene: Men sit and look, while the girls pass on their *passeggiata* attired in fashionable clothes. But, “more often than not, the young women thronging the central ways were heading elsewhere”: to the movies or to window-shop at the new department stores, where gender (and class) distinctions were more blurred. Young women were, indeed, at greater liberty to go out than ever before and had access to mass culture. However, de Grazia notes these spaces of freedom were for fascism battlefields on which fascism probably was a victor. “For a regime that treated rule over the piazza as a chief symbol of its public power” (203), commercial culture was a dangerous competitor, and women’s leisure was a “problem.” Hence, the battle over female aesthetic standards, body politics, and sports.

An example of a not-fully-explored potential is de Grazia’s discussion of resistance. I share the author’s impatience with a tendency common among left-wing social historians to decode endlessly “discursive systems” and to find them all transgressive. Armed struggle is not the same as individual spleen. But I think that she dismisses too easily the larger impact of “normal resistance.” She herself offers a tool that could be of immense help in understanding the construction of an “alternative society” within fascism and then fails to explore its theoretical implications. I refer to the concept of *oppositional familism* (“unresponsiveness, if not resistance, to appeals on behalf of the Fatherland”), which arose in counterposition to
fascist familism (“an ideology of domesticity emphasizing family togetherness, paternal authority, and unswerving female dedication to family in the interest of the party and the nation-state”) (82). Recent revisitation of Banfield’s “familism” by Robert Putnam shows how important this concept is in Italian social history, and how biased and flawed our understanding of it is. By exploring the contents of oppositional familism we could learn more about the largely ignored role women’s “normal resistance” played in undermining consent to fascism.

De Grazia vividly tells the story of a woman—a mother and an avowed admirer of Mussolini—who protests in a letter to the Duce against racial laws. Convinced of her moral right, she with no fear tells him that his actions are wrong and should be repaired. Were such opinions diffused? Were they conveyed to children, shopkeepers, neighbors, and friends? What teaching were young Italians receiving at home as opposed to school and fascist youth organizations?

Such inevitable shortcomings aside, this is the most mature book on the subject of women under fascism and an extremely important contribution to the social history of Italian fascism. It confirms de Grazia as one of the leading historians of modern Italy.

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Taken together, this collection comprises a well-executed, attractive, and stimulating book which well deserves study and comment by a large audience. The twelve articles in Geographical Inquiry and American Historical Problems are arranged in more-or-less chronological order, beginning with “The Ecological Causes of the Virginia Mortality Crisis” and concluding with the grand sweep of “The Periodic Structure of the American Past: Rhythms, Phases, and Geographic Conditions.” This rough chronological order parallels the relative theoretical ambitions and scope of these articles. In the first article, Earle gives a detailed analysis of the impact of pathogenic organisms in the estuaries around Jamestown during the early years of English colonization. In the last, he undertakes a vast reexamination of evidence drawn from 400 years of continental history in an attempt to impose a cyclic order upon the nation’s past and extend his results into the future. In between, among other topics, appear an examination of the role of tobacco cultivation in urbanization in the middle colonies, an explanation for Boston’s relative primacy as a center of insurrectionary activities in the years prior to the American Revolution, a favorable economic analysis of the possibility of slave labor in northern corn fields (provocative and convincing as far as cultivation goes, but rather naive in political terms), a