



How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy 1922-1945 by Victoria De Grazia

Review by: Jacqueline Reich

Italica, Vol. 71, No. 1 (Spring, 1994), pp. 132-133

Published by: [American Association of Teachers of Italian](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/479421>

Accessed: 12/11/2013 11:04

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The *Catalogo* itself is divided into several sections. The first part is an alphabetical catalogue of roughly 650 names that records feminine writings (predominantly in Italian) from 1539–1900 and which are available today in the Biblioteca Nazionale of Naples. The listing provides a bibliographic reference, and, in addition, catalogue numbers currently in use in the library. The *Indice cronologico* is a listing by both year and century. The *Indice per soggetto* presents groupings under general headings such as archeology, philosophical writings, and travel. The final section of the *Catalogo* is a series of graphs recording feminine writing by year, city, and publisher or printer.

Santoro, through the *Catalogo*, hopes to fill gaps in women's studies in Italy. The *Catalogo* and *Guida*, ten years of work by various scholars, are certainly positive steps toward the formation of basic bibliographical resources for scholars today. Both works address the relative "silence" of women writers in Italy. Although the project was focused on Naples it provides working guidelines for future catalogues in other libraries. In fact, Santoro states that she would like to see catalogues of *scrittura femminile* in other major libraries and eventually even in smaller institutions. The culmination of such a project would be the creation of a *Catalogo nazionale della scrittura femminile*. We can only hope that some day the idea may become a reality, facilitating research and uncovering interesting but lesser known texts.

VEENA KUMAR

University of Wisconsin/Madison

Victoria De Grazia. *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy 1922–1945*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992. Pp. xiii + 350.

While traditional interpretations of Italian Fascism have considered it a monolithic, totalitarian regime which succeeded in dictating all rules of social and cultural conduct from above, new research has focused instead on the contradictions inherent in both Fascist ideology itself and its applications. Far from being an all-encompassing system of government, the Fascist regime has been portrayed in these new accounts as constantly struggling to construct its discourses and create a hegemonic hold over both the public and the private spheres.

With her fascinating new work, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy 1922–1945*, Victoria De Grazia makes an invaluable contribution to the ongoing reevaluation of this period in Italian history. In this groundbreaking and provocative study, the author examines Fascism's attempt to control the social, the domestic, and the political in women's daily lives, accenting the "deep conflict within the Fascist state between the demands of modernity and the desire to reimpose traditional authority" (2). She supplements her historical analysis with excellent tie-ins to the cultural, literary, and private arenas, including references to films from the era, works of fiction (both pre- and postwar), and personal anecdotes from contemporary primary sources.

De Grazia's main thesis, outlined in the first two chapters, emphasizes that women were not merely passive subjects during the *ventennio*. They were instead "protagonists" who were able to make choices, albeit limited ones. Hence, she insightfully shifts the focus away from often detrimental notions of women as passive victims to their roles as active participants in both the private and the public spheres. She then traces the historical legacy of previous state policy toward women, highlighting the post World War I backlash against female emancipation and the feminist movement as the fundamental groundwork for future Fascist doctrine. In keeping with the main line of her argument, she discusses women's contributions to the early Fascist movement, including the founding of the *fasci femminili*, the establishment of its guidelines, and the creation of its mouthpiece, the *Rassegna femminile italiana*.

Each subsequent chapter explores in detail one aspect of women's everyday existence: motherhood, patriotic duty, growing up, work, leisure, and politics. She ap-

proaches what could be considered somewhat arbitrary categories methodically, first outlining the regime's official policies and then focusing on the contradictions characteristic of both their intention and their implementation. For example, in her treatment of Fascist demographic politics, she not only discusses the effects of such important legislation as the infamous bachelor tax, the ban on abortion and birth control, the creation of the ONMI (*Opera Nazionale Maternità ed Infanzia*), and tax incentives for large families, but also emphasizes sites of resistance to these policies: De Grazia points to the fact that the birth rate actually declined during the *ventennio* as an indication of what she terms the practice of "fertility control" on the part of women for both socioeconomic and emancipatory reasons. In addition, the chapter on motherhood appropriately includes a section devoted to fatherhood, highlighting its integral role in Fascist sexual politics. In the following chapters, she continues to accent other significant contradictions in Fascist policy toward women: the often irreconcilable division of loyalty between duty to the family and duty to the state, resulting in what De Grazia terms "oppositional familism," in which "many did come to believe that the family existed apart from the society, as a refuge against political intrusions rather than as a pillar of the nation-state" (115); schooling, in which many young girls experienced their first taste of freedom and at the same time were constrained by a traditional educational system which preached domesticity and subordination to its female pupils; the rise of a female labor force, despite legislation against it, and its consequences for female empowerment; and the rewriting of the history of the Resistance to include traditionally overlooked contributions by women.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the work examines women's leisure time. In many ways a continuation of her earlier study, *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), this chapter explores the new popular culture and women's place in it as its prime consumers. Treating such diverse subjects as fashion, sports, cinema, and literature, De Grazia notes how "the dictatorship could not bar their [women's] access to mass culture. But Fascism conditioned how freely they could use it" (232–33). Of particular interest is her cogent analysis of popular models of feminine beauty and behavior. She perceptively notes how the Fascist ideal of Woman as corpulent, robust, and fertile conflicted strongly with the images of thin, glamorous, and independent women so prevalent in the newly developing mass-media and commercial press. Here she cites the overwhelming influence of American culture, which, while feeding "conformist behavior," was also "egalitarian and nurtured new forms of individuality" (204).

While capacious in both its intent and execution, the text falls short in some minor but nonetheless essential areas. The Italian scholar would have been better served had the author included in Italian the full names of all the various Fascist organizations she cites in acronymic form. In addition, De Grazia tends to lose sight of the chronological sequence of events, assuming the reader already has sufficient background knowledge of Fascist history. There is some repetition between chapters, but this tendency arises more from the extensive and intertwining nature of Fascist discourses on women than through any fault of the author.

These slight limitations, however, should not in any way detract from the importance of this first comprehensive study in English on women and Italian Fascism. De Grazia is a master of textual analysis, be her sources historical, literary, or cinematic. She never fails to incorporate the central issues of Catholicism, class, and geography so essential to any discussion of Italian history. Her copious and informative notes draw on a wide variety of sources which in turn serve as an excellent bibliography for any scholar interested in further exploring this compelling subject.

JACQUELINE REICH
Trinity College