

Diana Garvin, *Feeding Fascism: The Politics of Women's Food Work*, Toronto University Press, Toronto, 2022, 292 pp. Paperback \$36.95. Hardback \$75.00

Feeding Fascism aims, as Diana Garvin's introduction explains, to tease out a 'tabletop politics' of women under Fascism by focusing on the points where the regime's drive to regiment Italy's foodways encountered the lived experience of the women who did the most to feed the nation. Accordingly, the book embraces a broad definition of 'women's food work', going beyond cooking to include not just labour in the fields and food factories, but also writing and home design. By 'examining the material world in which [women] lived in relation to the historical archive of their feelings, thoughts, and actions', and by registering the 'bright sound' of women's voices through 'site-based case studies', Garvin seeks to 'explore women's quotidian interactions with Fascist policy by opening the kitchen cupboard' (pp. 3-4). Her methods involve a 'food-based material culture studies reading' of her sources, and 'a primary focus on subjectivity' that 'underscore[s] the importance of location and material conditions in shaping habits and identity' (p. 14). Finally, Garvin promises to 'use direct, vibrant language to describe these histories' (p. 4).

Five chapters constitute the main body of *Feeding Fascism*. The first covers Fascism's dovetailed policies of autarky and pro-natalism, and examines a few places (Futurism, advertising, propagandistic ceramics...) where these policies played out. There is also a brief comparison with Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia.

The second chapter concentrates on women's agricultural labour and resistance. The third looks at breastfeeding in the factory context. The fourth turns to the home front, examining the family diet. And the final chapter is set in the kitchens of the *ventennio*, considered as engineered domestic spaces.

All in all, regrettably, *Feeding Fascism* does not consistently live up to its laudable ambitions. As far as her writing is concerned, Garvin is very accessible when she is working with her source material close to hand, but she can become either obscure or unconvincingly breezy in key passages of introduction, conclusion, contextualisation and synthesis. For example, I find it hard to grasp what the following sentence means: 'Fascism slurs ecology into biology to accomplish eugenic goals' (p. 46). She leaves some sweeping statements suspended in question-begging irresolution or even contradiction. On page 34 we are told that 'Fascist food policy had little effect on Italian foodways', and a page later that 'the lasting effects of Fascist food policy were subtle but irrevocable.' At the beginning of chapter two, Garvin asserts that the countryside was a place where the regime could mount a 'rigorous demonstration of Fascist modernity' (p. 47). Yet by the end of the chapter the emphasis is on 'the regime's narrative trope of the rural socially conservative national past' (p. 69).

Beneath some of these linguistic and presentational problems, I sense, lies Garvin's shaky command of the historiography on Fascism and other major themes in Italian history. For example, she chooses to focus on examples from northern and central Italy, but in trying to justify doing so she incidentally explains that it was Gramsci 'who broached the idea of the Southern Question', and that the Mezzogiorno was made up entirely of great estates, and a 'craggy, semi-arid climate' only suited to 'lemons, olives and grapes.' 'With no middle class to speak of, urban poverty and mafia violence ruled Catania and Palermo' (pp. 10-11). A lot of stereotypes and errors are concentrated into these few dismissive lines. The Southern Question, as both a phrase and a political and social cause, long predates Gramsci. In Manlio Rossi Doria's metaphor, the most advanced sectors of southern agriculture

(including wine and citrus fruit production) were concentrated in the irrigated and fertile coastal 'flesh' of the South, where properties tended to be smaller and more commercial, rather than in the arid 'bone' of the mountainous interior. Palermo had a flourishing middle class, including what Leopoldo Franchetti, writing in 1876, famously called the 'facinorosi della classe media' (middle-class hoodlums) of the mafia. But the mafia's violence was centred in Palermo's satellite settlements, among the lemon groves of the Conca d'Oro, rather than within the city. Across the island in the east, Catania ('the Milan of Sicily') also had a significant bourgeoisie, but its mafia problem would only really take hold in the 1970s.

There are other jarring mistakes. Garvin has working-class women contributing recipes to Pellegrino Artusi's great bible of late-nineteenth bourgeois cuisine, *La scienza in cucina*, and Italian troops already fighting on the Russian front of World War I in the 1930s. Pasta did not 'rule the Mezzogiorno menu' (p. 18): poor quality bread was the staple of the masses. And it is a very odd, anachronistic Americanism to describe the political orientation of the women rice-weeders of the Po valley as 'liberal' (pp. 66 and 82).

Tellingly, on page 9, where Garvin references the excellent scholars who provide the coordinates for research in her field, she does not mention a single historian writing in Italian. Works in Italian are also notably rare among the secondary sources listed in the bibliography. Perhaps as a result of this anglophone bias, Garvin is left to position herself within the dusty and unhelpful debate between Fascism-as-parenthesis and Fascism-as-revelation, opting for the latter: 'the Fascist *ventennio* is not so much representative of Italian cultural history as it is hyper-representative' (p. 15).

The framework of Garvin's engagement with the sources is also encumbered rather than enabled by her engagement with readings of Fascism as 'biopower' (David Horn's work is cited approvingly), or as an 'ascendant demographic power' to use Garvin's phrase (p. 18). Foucauldian approaches like this, which have had very little traction in Italy, tend to squeeze everything into a simplistic opposition between a tendentially all-encompassing state control targeted on the body, on the one hand, and an evanescent resistance on the other. They make it an unnecessarily laborious task to engage with much more important questions like the relationship between Fascism, as both movement and regime, and Italian society *under* Fascism, as well issues related to the yawning gap between Fascist ideology and policy on the one hand, and social reality on the other. Garvin's approach, with its fruitful emphasis on women's quotidian experience, has no need to disappear into any such blind alley, and no need to take aim at some of the straw targets she finds down there. Is there any historian who really subscribes to what she calls the 'dominant characterization of women's response to Fascist regime dictates as one of passive consent' (p. 9)?

Garvin is also not remotely patient or consistent enough when it comes to separating out trends that were typical of the regime, from those that were more long term and not specifically Italian, let alone specifically Fascist. Examples of the latter include consumerism, the application of science (or pseudo-science) to diet, workplace paternalism, the regimentation of factory-workers, and the *sventramento* (gutting) of cramped city centres. (This particular term dates back to the reconstruction of Naples following the cholera epidemic of 1884.)

Shorn of its overambitious introductory claims and its rickety historiographical scaffolding, *Feeding Fascism* is a book of interesting but disparate parts. Some of them take us onto ground that is already familiar to scholars in the area. In Chapter One, Futurist food writing gets yet another outing, and its influence over Fascist food policy is greatly exaggerated. ('Over the arc of the *ventennio*, the wild fantasies of Futurist cuisine were

diluted and morphed, but then eventually stamped and signed into formal food policy by the regime', p. 25.) The world of the *mondine* (rice-weeders) of the Po valley are the subject of Chapter Two. Fascist era cookery writers, like Ada Boni, are addressed in Chapter Four.

Taken on its own terms, Garvin's research on magazines, recipe books, newsreels, policy documents and adverts is often very well handled. I thought Chapter Five, on trends in kitchen design, was fascinating. However, the work does not live up often enough to the declared aim of using new kinds of sources to study women under Fascism 'from below'. Indeed, what is striking is how rare are the moments in the book when these claims find some justification. A representative case is Chapter Four, on recipe books and cookery manuals, in which only a few lines on a source from the Archivio Diaristico Nazionale (pp. 145-6) fulfil the author's promise to show how 'power worked from the bottom up as well as from the top down' (p. 9).

Perhaps we are forced to conclude that making coffee pots and chipped crockery talk to us across the decades is as difficult in practice as it is enticing in principle. And that, as an object of historical analysis, identity is far easier to invoke than it is to make materialise from the sources.

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