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Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy: The Massaie Rurali

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Perry Willson
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While Perry Willson?s previous book, *The Clockwork Factory: Women and Work in Fascist Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) focused on urban, working-class women in the *ventennio*, her current publication turns to the countryside to study the history of housewives and farmwomen who were associated with the Fascist organisation, *Massaie Rurali.* Both of these books broaden our understanding of popular experience in the Fascist years, and ably demonstrate how, indeed, the regime enticed, pulled and pushed people into its orbit. Willson?s works also add considerably to the development in the last decade or so of a gendered history of fascism. The current study of the *Massaie Rurali* (MR) is extremely important because, as Willson points out, there has been relatively little scholarly focus on the peasant population in this period, and in most of the works that do exist, gender is not considered. The Fascist regime was very interested in the countryside both materially and symbolically, and thus looking at the *Massaie Rurali* ? a huge organisation with over a million members by 1939 ? is a fruitful enterprise that deepens our understanding of Fascism.

Willson begins her study of peasant women and Fascism by providing a picture of ?the mosaic of farming? in rural Italy. Land ownership and use, the nature of work, and the goods produced are described and the variations in these processes, from north to south, but also within regions, are noted. As expected, Willson focuses on the role of women in agriculture, revealing the isolation of rural women?s worlds and the fact that

peasant women?s lives were ?subordinate to the authority of men and the needs of the household.?(p. 20) At the same time Willson argues that the economic role of women has been under-estimated and that ?women?s work was essential to interwar agriculture.?(p. 17)

From the initial chapter that provides an overview of women?s place in the rural economy in the 1920s, in Chapters 2 and 3 Willson moves to examine rural politics and the evolution of various organisations that targeted women, hoping to stem the flow of people from the land to the urban areas, in part by educating and convincing women to become good farmwomen. In describing the history of the Union of Country Housewives (UMC), an organisation founded in Lombardy at the end of World War I, Willson makes it clear that there were precursors to Fascist groups and programmes and in rural areas. The UMC became a national union in 1932, but eventually was closed by Fascist party leader Achille Starace in 1935. These chapters also include interesting narratives of the careers of several ?ladies in the field,? such as Regina Teruzzi and Annita Cernezzi Moretti, who were leaders of the early rural women?s groups. These two women represent a tradition of women?s activism that pre-dated the rise of Fascism, and clearly illustrate the heterogeneity of the women who were drawn to the movement, and who, at least for a time, were leaders of autonomous rural women?s groups in the 1920s and early 1930s. Throughout the book, Willson makes every effort to detail the public lives of individual women leaders, and the networks among them. She also shows shifts in the leadership as the organisations were absorbed into Fascist hierarchies, lost their autonomy, and became more focused on propaganda and symbolic activities.

In February 1933 the Fascists established a national union of rural housewives and rural women workers, thereby broadening their efforts to recruit individuals from all sectors of agricultural work. UMC members were absorbed into the National Fascist Federation of *Massaie Rurali* (FNFMR), and the Federation?s goals and many of its personnel were taken from the previous organisation (including Teruzzi and Cernezzi Moretti). In late 1934, the new union ?was transferred wholesale into the PNF [National Fascist Party] itself, becoming a special section of the Fasci Femminili.?(p. 77) Willson traces these events in Chapters 3 and 4, and effectively illustrates why and how the Fascist regime built its mass organisations, the degree to which central party authorities controlled the groups, and the programmes and activities that the organisations offered their membership. She points out that, like most Fascist unions, the leaders of the *Massaie Rurali*, were not from the class of the membership, and were appointed, not elected. Thus she concludes that, although the *massaie* were ?full Party members, the role of the peasant women themselves in the organisation was always fairly passive.?(p. 87) In these discussions, Willson not only gives the reader a sense of how sections were organized and their activities developed, but provides examples for the entire nation ? from Fiume to Cagliari, from Milan and Belluno to Palermo and Bari.

Although Willson?s descriptions of the bureacracy, leaders, and goals of the *Massaie Rurali* provide essential information, the heart of this book is really in Chapters 5-8, in which she leads us through the day-to-day operations of the organisation and its members. Here she paints a fascinating picture of escalating propaganda directed to the rural women in magazines, film, radio, and cultural activities. Using such material as accounts of local festivals and celebrations, films viewed in small villages, and recipes printed in a host of pamphlets, newspapers and journals, she makes every effort to link the central propaganda message to the targeted population. In attempting to provide clear popular responses to these efforts, Willson is limited by her sources. The average *massaia* did not write articles for the organisation?s journals, give speeches, leave diaries, nor write letters to the leadership. Nevertheless, even here Willson has given us a great deal of new information, by looking at a changing ?guard? of women leaders ? from the more politically independent women of the first hour to a slightly younger generation of more ?politically reliable? women who emerged later. The fact that Willson gives us details not only of national leaders, but regional figures throughout Italy adds to the unique value of this work. One of the most revealing accounts in the book is that of Laura Marani Argnani, the highly successful Fiduciary of the *Fasci Femminili* of Reggio Emilia. Absolutely devoted to Mussolini, Marani Argnani was also an inspired, pragmatic and quite human leader, and fortunately for us, left multiple sources of her activities and her interactions with the women she hoped to persuade and transform.

A major focus of rural women?s organisations both before and after 1922 was training women in some

aspects of farming and home economics ? for example, gardening, beekeeping, housekeeping, handicraft manufacture, and childcare. Willson?s detailed case study of the Sant?Alessio Training College just south of Rome reveals the ties between Fascist programmes and previous educational institutions, the increased Party control over education, and the quite gender-specific nature of the training and professionalization of women under the regime. Eventually the school became a teacher-training institute, and Willson describes how the school provided professional careers and stable employment for women within the Fascist structures. She also makes clear the fact that ?any potential emancipatory overtones which might emerge ? were kept strictly in check ? [T]he school trained its students for one job only ? [and safeguarded] certain jobs for men.?(p. 146-7) The directors of the school provide another set of women leaders whose public lives Willson so carefully extracts from the larger historical record. The inspiration for the Sant? Alessio College came originally from Aurelia Josz, a well-educated woman from a Florentine Jewish family who had established a farming school near Milan in 1902. By 1927, she was in charge of the school near Rome, but was ?sacked? a year later because ?her ?difficult character? was a hindrance to the school?s progress.?(p. 138) Josz was replaced by Laura Salvi, a landowner?s daughter with practical farming experience who had ?impeccable political credentials?, thus replicating patterns of change in leadership in the UMC.(p. 139)

The book?s epilogue carries the stories of rural women?s organisations and education, and of some of the leaders, into the post-war world. Willson makes some tantalizing suggestions about the connections between the UMC, the *Massaie Rurali*, and Christian Democratic efforts in the 1950s to mobilize peasant women in special sections of the *Coldiritti*, its affiliated organisation of small farmers. While the final chapter points historians of the postwar world in some interesting directions, it also is in this chapter that Willson pulls together a number of threads of argument developed in previous pages. Her conclusions describe the broader historical significance of the rural women?s organisations, and situate this study within larger historical debates about the nature of Fascism, and, in particular, the relationship between women and gender, and the Fascist movement.

R. J. B. Bosworth, in his 1998 study of the historiography of Italian Fascism, called for a better understanding of the ?variations in the lives of Italians of different classes, regions and genders, ? [and questioned] whether the totalitarian, ?top-down?, state-centred model is an acceptable explanatory device? for regimes such as this one.?(1) Willson?s work addresses these issues by including rural women in the picture of Fascist organisations, and by making clear that while the central authorities selected leaders for the groups, set forth policies and programmes, and controlled material resources, they also absorbed previous organisations and plans, and relied heavily on the energies of local officials and programmes established in rural sections throughout Italy. What we get from Willson?s work is a much better understanding of the dynamics, the give-and-take of decision-making in the groups collected under Party umbrella organisations like the *Fasci Femminili*.

It is now fairly common practice among historians of Fascist politics and culture to acknowledge what Marla Stone describes as the ?contradictions of Fascist ideology and its flexibility once in practice.?(2) Willson also points to conflicts between intentions and results of the regime in policies for ruralization and the mobilization of peasant women. Generally Fascist policies aimed ?to preserve traditional ways of life, class hierarchies and social stability, ? [and the regime?s message to rural women] was fundamentally reactionary.?(pp. 205, 206) At the same time, Willson argues, the experiences depicted in film and radio could have worked against ruralization plans, while in the MR the Fascists ?introduced large numbers of peasant women to the world of politics.?(p. 197) Here Willson carefully avoids concluding that Fascism gave women agency, or that it ?modernized? women. Other historians have pointed out that embracing ?the politics of difference? that characterized Right-wing, patriarchal systems did not necessarily empower women, because the results could be positive and negative at the same time.(3) As Willson sees it, while the effects of political activism in the *Fasci Femminili* or clandestine political organising for Communist Party women might have been modernizing or emancipating, these concepts are not necessarily the most suitable yardstick for measuring the importance of the MR to peasant women.

The highly political nature of the writing of histories of Fascism in the second half of the twentieth century has resulted in major differences of opinion about the continuities between the Fascist *ventennio* and the

historical conditions and traditions that preceded and followed it. Willson stands firmly with those who emphasize links to the past, in her case demonstrating how the goals, programmes and organisations of rural populations before 1922 were absorbed by the regime in the next decade. But she also argues that the regime did transform and alter previous patterns of women?s political activism. A tradition of autonomy and independence of earlier groups devoted to female (although not necessarily feminist) concerns was ?eclipsed?, as the organisation of rural women became an affiliate of the *Fasci Femminili* and of the national party. As she says, this transformation in the political structures of women?s activism was a legacy of Fascism because even after 1945, ?much of ?women?s politics? was pursued in sections of parties or trade unions essentially controlled by men.?(p. 4) Her example of the women?s section of the *Coldiritti* illustrates this point, but further evidence can be found in the relationships between the Italian Communist Party and the Union of Italian Women (UDI), and that of the Christian Democrats and the Center of Italian Women (CIF).

Other issues that have sparked debates among historians of Italian Fascism are the extent of Fascist power, and the degree of national consensus or support for the regime. Regardless of one?s position in these arguments, studies of central party functionaries and government leaders, men from elite social groups, intellectuals and policy makers do not necessarily lead to a functional model of totalitarianism, nor an understanding of popular views of Fascism. As already pointed out, Willson?s study does not present Fascism as a rigid and effective form of authoritarianism. Additionally, through her study of peasant women, Willson joins other historians who have sought to uncover the attitudes of the masses to the regime, and the historical meaning of the huge memberships in Fascist mass organisations like the *Massaie Rurali*. Willson argues that consensus and resistance often co-existed, and that for the rural women, ?membership ? often meant something less than a whole-hearted embracing of the Fascist cause.?(pp. 172, 197) According to her, women joined the MR for a variety of material and immaterial reasons, but since we lack full membership records and personal accounts it is hard to know exactly who joined, or what they thought of the organisation and the Party to which they now belonged. Willson might well agree with historian Carl Ipsen who has argued that we will probably never resolve the question of the degree to which ?students, workers, the young, the old, industrialists, the petite bourgeoisie and rural and urban workers supported Fascism?.(4)

What can we gain from Perry Willson?s book, beyond the considerable contributions I have already described? We can recognise that we do possess the records of a large group of ?mildly distinguished? people whose memoirs are neither exclusively apologetic or nostalgic.(5) Many of the actors are women about whom little has been written. Willson has begun to tell their stories, through the lives of people like Laura Marani Argnani and her peers. Reading these accounts we get a much better sense of the ordinary, influential, but not powerful people who supported and did the work of the Fascist regime. They were not dupes or ?hacks,? but instead were intelligent, strong-minded individuals who lived active public lives during the inter-war years and beyond.

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Notes

1. R. J. B. Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism* (London: Arnold, 1998), pp. 29, 31.Back to (1)
2. Marla Stone, ?Book Review?, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 3 (1998), 193-6.Back to (2)
3. For an excellent comparative discussion of these issues see Ralph M. Leck, ?Conservative empowerment and the gender of Nazism: paradigms of power and complicity in German history?, *Journal of Women?s History*, 12 (2002), 147-69.Back to (3)
4. Carl Ipsen, *et al*., ?History as it really wasn?t: the myths of Italian historiography?, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 6 (2001), 402-19.Back to (4)
5. This phrase by Ian Hacking is used by David G. Horn to describe ?the voices? in his book, *Social Bodies: Science, Reproduction and Italian Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 9.Back to (5)

The author thanks Professor Slaughter for her review and does not wish to comment further.

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[2]

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