

## Italy's Social Revolution: Charity and Welfare from Liberalism to Fascism

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Carl Levy

Dr Quine's study of the Italian welfare state between the Liberal and Fascist eras is an impressively researched, well-written and original contribution to an under-researched field. Even in Italian there are few global accounts of early Italian welfare state. In English the field is covered in general accounts of the social history of Italy or in passing in reference to the working-class movement, women's history or economic and demographic histories. Dr Quine announces that she will not produce this global history; instead she approaches the welfare state in Italy by examining how it treated unwed mothers and their children. The history of women, the family and children in Italy are now familiar to an anglophone audience, but this is the first study in English that brings these interests consistently into the context of understanding the nature of the Italian welfare state. Dr Quine is rather dismissive of the sociological model makers who study the welfare state, although perhaps she is unfair, since Esping-Andersen (1) for the general European context, and certainly Maurizio Ferrera (2) for the Italian, can be read with great profit by historians. Nevertheless, Dr Quine is forgiven for her historian's bewilderment at parallel sociological and political science universes. She employs a marvellous array of archival material to illustrate the plight of unwed mothers and their children in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italy (State archives, Church archives, private archives, and private papers). As the historian should, she brings to life her 'case studies'. But she also does not slight a theoretical framework, which ties together the three parts of this study at its conclusion.

In the first section she examines the origins of the welfare state during the elitist Liberal regime (1862-1890). In the second section of the book she examines the reform of the charitable organisation of welfare under Crispi, the rise of the 'insurer state' under Giolitti and the Fascist 'totalitarian' welfare state under

Mussolini (1890-1939). In the third part of her book, Dr Quine examines the problem of child abandonment under liberalism and fascism to highlight the continuities and changes in treatment of powerless groups by state and society.

These three sections of the study are bound together by two overarching themes, firstly, how 'how Italian governments from liberalism to fascism attempted to build a welfare state atop a charitable foundation that was fast set in the Middle Ages'. (p. xiii) Thus the result was a welfare state in the twentieth century that was 'a peculiar blend of the old and the new, the traditional and the modern, the religious and the secular and the public and the private that even Tittmuss would have had trouble describing it'. (ibid.) The other major theme of this book is what one can call (if I may use a rather ungraceful turn of phrase) the implementation gap. Plans and organisations on paper never quite impact on the real world. And this is where Quine comes into her element: the use of archival material illustrates in a grubby human way the vast canyon between *paese reale* and *paese legale*.

The other important approach in Dr Quine's study is its periodization. There is no 'year zero' for the creation of the 'totalitarian' welfare state. The Fascists drew upon their predecessors. Furthermore, the post-1945 welfare state inherited the institutions of welfare that the Fascist state had erected. Looking the other way, the approaches of governments in the late nineteenth-century drew upon ways Napoleon and the Enlightenment reformers approached the issue of poverty and charity. While this periodization is important, if I have a problem with Dr Quine's fine study it is in the role of the Great War and the massive reforms enacted during the war years and the *biennio rosso* (1919-1920), to which I will return in my conclusion.

Overshadowing her periodization, indeed in the general history of modern Italy, are Church-state relations. The Liberal state relied upon the institutions of Catholic charity, the *opere pie*, to alleviate poverty. Thus the nineteenth century liberal elite, indeed the greatest representative of them all, Cavour, envisaged a *carità legale*, in which the delivery of relief was in the hands of the Church, even if these institutions had been formally secularised. The suppression of certain religious orders and the sale of Church property were not used to alleviate the enormous poverty that blighted the Kingdom of Italy. This windfall was diverted into financing armaments, shipping and building railways. The *opere pie*, controlled by local elites, became sources of corruption and influence peddling. Even Crispi's attempts to clean up a scandalous solution (the books of the *opere pie* were a black hole and the lot of orphans and the elderly poor in these institutions was shocking) did not amount to much. And with an adept use of archives, Dr Quine shows that Franco della Peruta's and Raffaele Romanelli's claims that local administration and the prefects became more effective is grossly exaggerated.<sup>(3)</sup> Thus the 'implementation gap' reigned supreme.

Even in the 1890s, Italy was a land wracked by pellagra, scurvy, rickets typhoid fever, pulmonary tuberculosis and, most deadly of them all, malaria. The decline in mortality was slow. The Giolittian era (1900-1914) is often pictured as the great breakthrough. In 1900 Italy was thirty years behind France, Germany or the United Kingdom when it came to social legislation. But Dr Quine has little time for Giolitti's efforts. His social policy was ungenerous and slight. Giolitti's introduction of social insurance was limited to the Northern (largely male) industrial working class: in 1905 1 per cent of the Italian labour force were in the *cassa nazionale*, while 51 per cent of the German labour force was insured. His fiscal conservatism (the lack of progressive taxation compounded by a huge budget deficit caused by his imperialist adventure in Libya) limited the cash available. And like his predecessors he lacked personnel to be factory inspectors or to inspect orphanages and poor houses. The South was almost completely forgotten: betterment could only be sought by massive emigration abroad.

Although the Fascists set to creating a welfare state after the collapse of Liberal Italy, a summary of its effects on the eve of war in 1939, is damning. The effects of Fascist welfare state, Dr Quine argues, were episodic, fragmentary and discriminatory protection. Unemployment insurance was set at starvation wages. Workers gained access to an inadequate tiered system of health care. The alphabet soup of agencies set up to administer social insurance (which carried on under the post-1945 welfare state) were staffed by Fascists and their friends; Fascist aid to the unemployed during the grim 1930s went to those with the right politics and the peasants were forgotten. The battle against urbanism and its romantic twin, the praise of ruralism, was

reduced in effect to the control of the movement of peasants into cities and the hounding of peasant beggars who slipped through the net. Enormous surpluses were allowed to accumulate in the unemployment and pension funds and were used by the regime as milch cows for its pet projects. The regime's efforts to legitimise itself through loud and useless campaigns against alcoholism, cancer, drugs or leprosy produced few practical results.

Thus the Fascist welfare state shared much with its Liberal predecessor: widespread practices of patronage and clientelism, patchy coverage and an implementation gap. It also shared a tortured partnership with the Church. Fascism of course did try to come to an understanding with the Church through the Lateran Treaties, but its demographic campaign (and other policies) led to disagreement and tensions. And it is precisely in the Fascists' innovative approach to child abandonment and single mothers that the regime broke with Liberal and Catholic traditions. Until the late nineteenth century child abandonment was dealt with through the institutions of the Church or their secularised successors. Because of the shame of unwed children, traditionally many women left anonymously their babies in a *ruota* (turnstile) attached to a church or *brefotrofito* (foundling home). Liberals were shocked by the primitive and unhealthy conditions of these foundling homes and the alarmingly high rates of mortality amongst the babies in their care. But whereas the Church treated unwed mothers as fallen women who could still be saved, the secular social scientists at the turn of the century turned them into incurable pathological 'types'. It was only the Fascists who attempted to avoid both alternatives.

The first legislation to protect the rights of children in the care of wet nurses, foundling homes, orphanages, reformatories and prisons was passed by the Fascists in 1927. The Fascists also established the ONMI, which promoted benefits for mothers and children. The Fascists were the first government in modern Italy who tried to tackle the problem child abandonment through the creation of modern, rational and secure forms of care. These progressive acts were driven forwards by the regime's aim to regenerate the Italian race through welfare and to promote a higher birth rate, so that Italy could become a great imperial power. Until 1938, when the Race Laws were introduced, these demographic politics could at times be confused with the politics of the secular Left, and it was just this secular nature, which led to contradiction and failure. On the one hand the Fascists still relied upon the Church to help administer the welfare state, but on the other hand, the treatment of unwed mothers outside of the moral compass of sin and redemption alienated the Catholic hierarchy. Dr Quine demonstrates this in her case study of a progressive home for unwed mothers in Rome, run by the aristocratic radical feminist-turned-Fascist, Daisy di Robilant. While she used the rhetoric of 'the defence of the race' in her experiment, di Robilant alienated the Church, which felt she had not sufficiently reminded her inmates of the sinfulness of their lives. In any case, as with much of the rest of story outlined above, financial constraints destroyed this enlightened experiment, as it indeed limited the impact of the ONMI on the lives of women and children in Fascist Italy.

I would like to conclude with one mild criticism of this valuable book. The most significant leap in the history of the Italian welfare state before 1945 occurred during the Great War and in the immediate post-war period. This of course coincided with the massive industrialisation of the country due to the imperatives of war mobilisation. During the war years, women entered a wide variety of industrial occupations for the first time. Dr Quine should have placed greater emphasis on this seminal shift. In the years 1917-1919 social entitlements were dramatically increased. The first compulsory unemployment scheme for full-time workers was introduced and even agricultural workers were partially covered. And finally compulsory pensions were introduced: social insurance coverage of the labour force, which was at 2 per cent in 1915 leapt to 38 per cent in 1920 (versus 57 per cent in Germany). Fascism inherited this watershed moment, but it neither created it, nor improved very much upon it. In a similar fashion, as Ester De Fort shows in the context of primary education (4), the late Liberal period saw a breakthrough in social citizenship in Italy. Although Dr Quine discusses the 1917-1919 watershed, she should have discussed it more thoroughly. She is very damning of Italian liberalism: 'Stripped of its high-minded principles and values, Italian liberalism was nothing more than a coterie of men dedicated only to the pursuit and preservation of political power'. (p. 63) Nevertheless, in the stormy war and post-war years one can detect a new Progressive synthesis of younger radical liberals and reformist socialists, which might have created another Italy under other conditions. But

as Dr Quine shows in her useful conclusion, 'path dependency' (with apologies for the political science speak, that is historical legacies) in Italy limited alternatives to the messy compromises that plagued the welfare state. Lacking a Reformation, and the reform of the administration of poor relief seen in England and Prussia in the nineteenth century, meant that the secular state had to rely upon its sworn enemy to implement welfare policy.

Although Farrell-Vinay has written an excellent account of the *opere pie* in Italian [\(5\)](#), Dr Quine's encompasses a range of other interests. She has written a fine study that deserves translation into Italian.

March 2004

## Notes

1. Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Maurizio Ferrera, *Il welfare state in Italia: sviluppo e crisi in prospettiva comparata* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1984).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Franco Della Peruta, *Società e classi popolari nell'Italia dell'Ottocento* (Palermo: EPOS, 1985); Franco Della Peruta, *Conservatori. liberali e democratic nel Risorgimento* (Milan: Angeli, 1989); Raffaele Romanelli, *Il comando impossibile: stato e società nell'Italia liberale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1988 and new edn 1995).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Ester De Fort, *La scuola elementare dall'unità alla caduta del fascismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Giovanna Farrell-Vinay, *Povert  e politica nell'Ottocento. Le opere pie nello stato liberale* (Turin: Scriptorium, 1997).[Back to \(5\)](#)

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