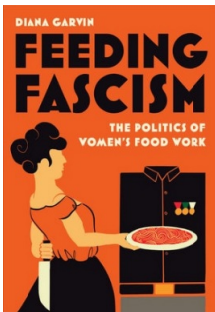


VI, 2023/2

Diana Garvin

Feeding Fascism

Review by: Vanda Wilcox



Authors: Diana Garvin

Title: Feeding Fascism. The Politics of Women's Food Work

Place: Toronto

Publisher: University of Toronto Press

Year: 2022

ISBN: 9781487528188

URL: [link to the title](#)

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Citation

V. Wilcox, review of Diana Garvin, *Feeding Fascism. The Politics of Women's Food Work*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2022, in: ARO, VI, 2023, 2, URL <https://aro-isig.fbk.eu/issues/2023/2/feeding-fascism-vanda-wilcox/>

Diana Garvin's *Feeding Fascism: The politics of women's food work*, is a beautiful volume, lavishly illustrated in colour. This matters: the work analyses an impressively eclectic body of visual and material culture, and it is a great merit that the reader can also examine the photographs, adverts, posters, food packaging, sketches and more that are under discussion. It also reflects Garvin's close attention to the nature of material objects as well as the messages they convey. The stylish presentation highlights the book's original, inspiring and astonishingly diverse source base. Garvin analyses architectural plans for kitchens, ceramic serving dishes, the songs women sung in the rice-paddies, adverts from stock-cube companies, baby-rearing newsreels from the *Istituto Luce* and more besides. The focus on material culture is particularly important in offering new ways to write histories of everyday lives under fascism, and to approach aspects of women's lived experience which can be hard to for historians to locate. It also makes the book an enjoyable read, despite the sometimes opaque and wordy style.

What Garvin terms «table-top politics» was central to the lives of women and families in the *Ventennio*, and she convincingly shows that the subject can be effectively tackled through the creative use of new types of material. She highlights some of the ways women embraced, resisted or accommodated themselves to the dictates and pressures of the fascist regime in homes and workplaces where, as recipe-writers, rice-paddy weeders, chocolate packagers, housewives or domestic cooks, they participated in the production, preparation and consumption of food. Women's food work provided a vital nexus between the regime's practices of bodily control and its economic policies – a process reaching its apotheosis in the state governance of breastfeeding, as women's bodies combined reproduction and food production. Garvin is particularly strong on the nuances of class differences, though curiously uninterested in the

local inflections of food culture, perhaps one of the dominant themes of Italian food studies. Sicily and the south are deliberately excluded, as the introduction explains, but the book still covers a wide geographical span. Yet food cultures in Ferrara are not the same as those in Vercelli, and perhaps the choice to exclude such a major approach should have been discussed in the text. Nonetheless, Garvin successfully highlights the diversity and variance of women's everyday experiences under fascism in this richly textured mosaic.

Despite the strengths of this book it has two significant and frustrating weaknesses, one methodological and one analytical. The former is that the author has engaged relatively little with the Italian-language historiography. It is more than a little surprising to find that all the key scholarship cited in the introduction as foundational to the study (see p.9) is published in English. Essential works of Italian scholarship in fascist economics, propaganda, and gender are missing, as are the Italian-language works of Massimo Montanari – doyen of Italian food studies – and his colleague Alberto Capatti, not to mention highly relevant work by scholars like Lucia Re or Daniela Adorni and Stefano Magagnoli. The lack of familiarity with the Italian literature is perhaps linked to the fact that the translations and interpretations of Italian texts are sometimes shaky, if not outright incorrect (e.g. p.57 «*il fante va in guerra*» is bizarrely translated as «the child goes to war»).

The analytical problem is a lack of adequate contextualisation in both space and time. Firstly this leads to a confusion of correlation with causation: as Garvin herself highlights, the innovations in hygiene, design, nutrition and rationalisation which were promoted in Fascist Italy often had roots or models in the USA, Germany and France, among others. In what ways, then, did these policies become «fascist» when implemented in Italy? If they were in fact significantly different under Fascism than elsewhere, this case needs to be made explicit. Secondly, there are earlier precedents within Italy for many of the fascist-era policies here analysed, which are ignored in this book. For instance, on p.156 it is incorrectly claimed that the *Ventennio* «was the first time the state attempted to create public housing and to interfere in private life – and is thus highly note-worthy as a tipping point in this regard». In fact the *Istituto Autonomo Case Popolari* dates to 1903, and the first public housing in Rome was built before the First World War. Equally, during that war, rationing and public health measures combined to frame restrictive diets and avoiding food wastage as patriotic measures, making the kitchen a key site of the home front in 1915-1918 just as in the fascist wars. There were even propaganda campaigns in 1918 invoking the greater consumption of rice, an idea which *Feeding Fascism* defines instead as an aspect of fascist autarky. The claims for the intrinsically fascist nature of the various policies analysed in this book don't always hold up (and the numerous minor but irritating factual errors further undermine the reader's confidence). To propose an argument about the distinctiveness of fascist food production policies and experiences requires at least some sense of the wider context of twentieth-century Italian history as well as a clearer reflection on contemporary comparisons.

If the big picture is sometimes rather out of focus, Garvin is at her best in her evocative close-ups on individual objects of material culture: the cut-out photography of a propaganda image, the uneasy space between kitchen and salone created by the new passapiatti, the dynamics of a flimsy recipe leaflet tucked into an apron pocket. She presents a rich array of thought-provoking ideas; her concluding remarks on the power of the small and the importance of small or underused archives highlight how productive this approach, once properly contextualised, might be.