

The case for historians' return to narrative – a process now in its fourth decade – is of course not without its merits. But choosing that particular form of history writing should not preclude the historian from adding another layer to the story: the layer which deals with the place of events and their meanings in the work of other historians and historical debates. Here, Marwil's book is too often silent.

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Garlic & oil: food and politics in Italy, by Carol Helstosky, Oxford–New York, Berg, 2006, 248 pp., £18.99 (paperback), ISBN 1-85973-895-8

The association between Italy and food has become universally indissoluble. Helstosky's book aims to investigate why and how Italians have shaped their food habits and cuisine. The subject is potentially very wide and the author limits the period of her research to between unification and the 1960s, as if previously Italian food was something completely different and did not constitute instead a tradition upon which to draw. One can acknowledge that only with unification have we seen common food policies and regulations in Italy. However, the implication that politics alone is able to influence so heavily such a sphere of human life seems rather reductive.

Chapter 1 deals with the years 1861–1914 and the food legislation of liberal governments after unification. According to the author, if Liberal Italy had huge differences and customs within its territory, 'The one activity shared by the majority of citizens was the seemingly endless quest to fill one's stomach' (p. 14). Although Italians did not face starvation or malnutrition, their diet was poor and scanty, encompassing less meat and fats than in previous centuries. The reasons for this lay in the disorganisation of the distribution, storage and retail sectors that contributed to rising prices, and in the growing demands of an expanding population. The poor diets of many Italians also contributed to the crisis of production: as Helstosky points out, inadequate nutrition had a negative impact on labour productivity.

Chapter 2 focuses on the years 1915–1922. Helstosky states that, surprisingly, the First World War improved the standards of eating in Italy: with the majority of men at the front, the economy experienced for the first time full employment and high wages that allowed the purchase of quality food. Fixed prices for basic foods, state intervention and the purchase of wheat from the Allies at subsidised prices also contributed to the improvement of the Italian diet in this period (still, though, the average consumption of meat amongst civilians and military was below European levels). After the war, when extraordinary wartime measures were no longer in place, 'consumers found it difficult to return to pre war consumption habits...opting instead to pay higher prices and more taxes to secure the goods they desired' (p. 51). This desire, however, clashed with the economic situation, with inflation and the onerous debts the government had to pay: prices increased but not wages and this, and the example of the 1917 Russian Revolution, led to many popular demonstrations, riots and protests.

Chapters 3 and 4 analyse the 20-year period of Fascist government, chapter 3 focusing on the years 1922–1935, chapter 4 on 1935–1945. Unlike any other Italian government, Fascist food policies heavily influenced the Italian diet because of the way the regime used food as a tool to unite the population and bind it to the dictatorship through sacrifice. Fascism turned the scarcity of food into an Italian virtue and used every means of propaganda to link abstinence to the supposed moral strength and character of Italians. This not only helped the regime deal with the post-war turmoil but also underpinned the goal of complete self-sufficiency (autarky), so that food and food policies became a way to assert Italian independence from market fluctuations and the Western powers.

The Italian diet did not improve during the first 10 years of Fascism, and the consumption of meat remained below European levels. The second decade saw even greater food shortages due to the sacrifices imposed on the population by the regime's military ventures and pursuit of empire. In particular, the invasion of Ethiopia led to international sanctions against Italy, while the colony itself failed to become the promised granary of Italy. Austerity measures and propaganda increased from 1935 and the regime urged citizens to tighten their belts even more to show to the world the strength and resistance of Italian people.

With the outbreak of the Second World War and especially after Italy's entry in 1940, Fascist Italy became increasingly dependent on supplies from Nazi Germany. German demands on Italian food supplies, however, aggravated the shortage of goods within Italy and fed the development of an intense black market. By the end of the war, both in the Italian Social Republic and in the liberated territory, food supply had become a major issue.

Chapter 5 focuses on the years 1945–1960. In the first years, the main concern of governments was to crack down on the black market and ensure that the majority of Italians had enough food; this period saw the institution of soup kitchens with free or cheap meals for the poor. According to Helstosky, the popularity of soup kitchens helped create a new Italian food habit, that of eating out instead of at home. The government also used American reconstruction funds to provide food for the country, thus tying the availability of food to the ideological battle against communism. During the subsequent economic boom, Italy experienced for the first time a period of prosperity, high wages and low prices. However, apart from a rise in food consumption in restaurants and the growth of the food industry with new goods for the Italian table, food habits did not change dramatically: Italians simply consumed more of what they used to eat before.

The epilogue is a short and rather superficial overview of contemporary Italy, underlining the resistance of Italians to the expansion of fast food and stressing – perhaps a bit too strongly – the impact of the 'Slow Food' movement on Italian culinary culture.

Garlic and oil is well-written and an enjoyable work, based on a wide variety of sources including parliamentary papers, magazines and cookbooks. There is an imbalance, though, in its coverage: the 20 years of Fascism take up a large part of the book, perhaps because this period best supports the author's argument that state intervention has heavily influenced food habits in Italy. The book also rests on the questionable assumption that Italian cuisine is so simple because historically Italian people have endured a diet of scarcity, and therefore the Mediterranean diet is just the result of a lack of available food. It is questionable not least because Helstosky seems to contradict it on two occasions. First, when speaking of the first wave of Italian migrants to America, she states that migrants kept their food habits and their Italian recipes even when they had made money and could afford to buy 'new' foods that they were unaccustomed to in Italy. Second, the

author does not explain why Italians during the economic boom of the 1950s maintained their traditional 'poor' diets, despite their new wealth.

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