

Introduction

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The articles published in this special issue were originally presented as papers at a conference entitled 'Gender and the Private Sphere in Italy: Home, Family and Sexuality'. This conference, held in London in the Italian Cultural Institute on 22–23 November 2002, was the twentieth annual conference of the Association for the Study of Modern Italy. This special issue contains a selection of some of the papers with a contemporary focus, while some of the more historical work presented at the same event is published in a companion volume.¹ Together, the two volumes collect some exciting new research on the study of the private sphere in Italy, showing the range and scope of the work currently being carried out on the subject in a variety of disciplines, from history to sociology to anthropology to literature. The multidisciplinary focus of this special issue reflects the nature of the 'private sphere' itself, as a social and discursive field defined and shaped by a wide range of historically shifting factors and influences, ranging from medical and legal discourses to personal, cultural and social expectations, and to economic and political pressures.

Both the original conference from which these papers derive and this special issue also take as their focus the concept of gender. Some sectors of Italian academia have been slow to embrace gender as a category of scholarly analysis. Italian feminist historiography, for example, has had a fairly lengthy struggle to become accepted by the Italian historical establishment. Moreover, although by now a great deal of research has been done on the history of Italian women,² some of which is excellent, the approach of many feminist historians, who have often tended to concentrate on the question of women's subjectivity, has not lent itself well to a gendered approach to understanding the past, and women's history has remained fairly separate from mainstream historical debates. In the last few years, however, this situation has begun to change. Italy now has, for example, its own gender history journal which commenced publication in 2002.³ Many Italian historians still remain, however, somewhat resistant to the idea of gender as a core category which has shaped past societies.⁴ To date, moreover, this new interest has led only a handful of historians to extend their analysis to the social construction of masculinity.⁵

The situation in Italian sociology and anthropology, however, has been somewhat different. In these disciplines there has been a sustained and explicit interest in gender as a category of analysis since the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In sociology there is, by now, a vast literature on the role of women in the home and in the labour market, the social construction of femininity and the transformation of gender roles in relation to changes in the

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family in the post-war period.⁶ Italian anthropology of Italy has instead focused on the cultural aspects of gender and gender identity, including the cultural construction of the body and of kinship. Reflecting the roots of the discipline in 'folklore' studies, analysis has tended to concentrate on so-called 'popular culture', associated with 'traditional', rural milieus and with the South, with fewer studies of contemporary, mainstream and urban culture and of the North, although the balance is now shifting, for instance in relation to studies of maternity and motherhood.⁷

The various articles collected in this volume, although from different perspectives and drawing on a range of different types of source material, all shed light on the importance of the 'private sphere', and indeed of gender, in the processes of change in Italian society since the Second World War. The 'private sphere' is not, of course, isolated from large-scale economic, social and political changes. Indeed numerous scholars have argued that such changes enter people's lives, and are incorporated into their daily existence, precisely through the mediation of this sphere.⁸ Moreover, the 'private sphere' is central to the analysis of change in Italian society in this period because Italians themselves have perceived it as a key social and symbolic terrain in relation to which to envisage and debate the extent and meaning of old and new, continuity and change, innovation and conservation, and modernity and tradition. Throughout this period, many in Italy have viewed the private sphere as a keystone of society and an important repository of the past in the face of change. As such, it is, and has been, a powerful magnet for hopes and fears about both the present and the future. These hopes and fears, as we will see in the course of this volume, are expressed in both public and private arenas, articulated in and through debates and discussions in the mass media, in legal, legislative, scientific and ecclesiastical circles, as well as within families and couples.

The articles collected in this volume focus on the period since the end of the Second World War, a period in which Italy has undergone massive and rapid social, economic and political transformations. During this time advancing industrialization, urbanization and secularization have all had a huge impact on the private sphere. While for most Italians the family has remained a central focus of social and self-identification and allegiance, birth rates, already falling by the mid-twentieth century, plummeted in the second half of the century.⁹ Moreover, the power of the Catholic Church, previously an enormous influence on the private sphere and on state policy towards it, has declined greatly over this period. Such processes were already clearly under way at the beginning of the period under examination here and the three articles in this issue (those by Morris, Bernini and Nemeč) which focus on the early post-war years all reveal an Italy in transition, where the model of a new 'modern' society beckoned, but where the Catholic Church and Catholic values, while beginning to be perceived and presented as 'traditional', were still extremely influential and retained their force particularly in defining and regulating the ethics and morality of the 'private'. The two articles focusing particularly on present-day Italy and the recent past (those by Saraceno and by Bonaccorso) both show how, although such processes of change have continued, developed and, in some cases, accelerated, many contradictory elements still remain. As all the articles demonstrate, over the half-century examined, the private sphere has been, and still is, very much a contested terrain at the heart of social and political debate in Italy.

In investigating the history of the private sphere, one significant problem is clearly that of finding sources. Penny Morris' article provides one interesting solution to this problem by focusing on a hitherto somewhat neglected aspect of the huge surge in Italian magazine publishing after the Second World War: the rise of 'agony aunt' columns. Although such columns are usually treated rather dismissively in studies of the history of journalism, Morris demonstrates their usefulness as one of the few forums in which 'private' issues of family, marriage and so on, were aired in public in the 1950s. As Morris argues, her research shows that many of those who penned these 'problem pages' did, in fact, treat them very seriously, and consequently they can be considered an important source for exploring some of the ideas of the period about a range of 'private' topics. Morris' article concentrates on one of the many agony aunts of the time, novelist Alba de Céspedes, who often tackled quite controversial issues such as divorce in her column entitled 'Dalla parte di lei' (from her point of view) which appeared regularly in *Epoca* magazine. Although Morris presents de Céspedes as firmly on the side of modernity, wishing to challenge many traditional values of the time and implicitly following an American model in her ideas about the private sphere, de Céspedes was able to take this approach only by addressing certain issues in a very cautious manner in order not to arouse the wrath of the clergy.

Stefania Bernini's article on motherhood similarly testifies to the contradictions at the heart of early post-war Italian society, where Church morality and modernity interacted in complex ways. Like Morris, Bernini focuses on textual sources, in her case writings by medical experts on maternity and parenthood. As Bernini argues, far from confining themselves to purely medical questions, these writers interwove medical questions with moral and social issues, often seeing direct connections between physical health and moral conduct. They were also influenced by the legacy of years of Fascist rule (made concrete by the re-opening of the Opera Nazionale Maternità ed Infanzia—ONMI—the Fascist welfare organization for poor mothers and children) with its insistence on the primacy of women's maternal role, as well as by the anxieties generated by, in particular in the second half of the 1950s, the accelerating pace of economic and social change. Such medical writings, Bernini argues, contributed to the shaping of cultural interpretations of maternity and the idea of women's 'natural' biological destiny as motherhood. Their approach often closely reflected official Catholic ideas on suitable gender roles and this led to Italian doctors taking a very different approach to, for example, the question of the treatment of pain in childbirth and the 'natural childbirth method', compared with their colleagues in certain other countries such as Britain.

Gloria Nemeč has chosen a different approach to the problematic question of sources. Her work, which looks at a local case study of changes within families in the immediate post-war period, is based largely on oral history. The rapid and forced urbanization of large numbers of people who moved to the city of Trieste from border territories incorporated into the new Yugoslavian state after the Second World War, led, according to the women and men interviewed by Nemeč, to a more fluid attitude to gender roles within the household. The mass exodus from rural areas to Trieste meant that large numbers of families made the transition from a peasant lifestyle to a new urban existence in an extremely brief period of time and, for the first time, she argues, men employed in factories, who

previously had been used to interminable hours of agricultural labour, now had time to spare after the end of the working day. This led to husbands taking an unprecedented role in some aspects of housework, helping care for children and so on. Nemeč's findings, although focusing on a very specific, regionally defined and not necessarily particularly typical group, could be seen as emblematic of the shifts in power relations and roles in families brought by urbanization and the general rapid economic changes of the post-war period.

Sociologist Chiara Saraceno, in her contribution to this volume is, however, considerably less sanguine about the degree of change in this respect, arguing instead that new patterns of female behaviour have to date 'had little impact on the gender division of labour within households'. This suggests that the process of change identified by Nemeč in the early post-war period has not developed much since then. Elsewhere, too, there are many indices of continuity: despite a precipitous drop in family size, the two-parent, heterosexual, married couple remains the context in which the vast majority of Italian children are born, and the family of origin remains the place where most Italians live until marriage, even if this is not until quite late in life. The enduring centrality of the family as a key, if not always the main, focus of social identification, personal self-realization and belonging, unusual in Western countries¹⁰ is, in itself, a great area of continuity over this period. Saraceno does, however, eschew simplistic assessments of this phenomenon, arguing instead that, beneath the surface of apparent stability, a certain amount of change is taking place. There have been, for example, huge shifts in attitudes to sexual behaviours. Moreover, some apparent areas of continuity, in particular the advanced age at which many Italians leave the parental home, have changed radically in meaning over time. Other types of change facing the Italian family are more similar to those in other Western European countries, particularly the ageing of the population. As Saraceno argues, however, this phenomenon poses specifically Italian problems because the welfare state is so weak and ineffective. In Italy, more than in many other Western countries, kin networks have remained of vital importance in the care of those elderly persons who are no longer able to be independent.

The work of social anthropologist Monica Bonaccorso is a good illustration of the care that needs to be taken in assessing questions of change and continuity. She shows how older cultural values can resurface and be reinforced in relation to something which appears to be completely new and unprecedented. Bonaccorso's research is based on interviews with infertile couples who have chosen to resort to methods of assisted conception which involve gamete donation. This world of high technology provides a startling contrast to Stefania Bernini's work on Church and medical attitudes to maternity in the 1950s, still long before the birth of the first 'test tube baby'. Bonaccorso's article, however, far from presenting the widespread recourse to such modern, technological solutions to infertility as testimony to the modernity of Italian society today, argues that the choices of such couples are, in some respects, motivated by a rejection of change and difference. They turn to these new technologies out of a desire to conform—the desire to form a family which is indistinguishable from other families. Bonaccorso's article serves as useful warning to those who might believe that the current extremely low birth rates in Italy (among the lowest in the world) mean that Italians are turning against parenthood. Secondly, and more broadly, Bonaccorso's work is well worth reading alongside the other articles in this

volume, for she invites us to problematize the meaning of change/modernity itself and shows how, once personal perceptions of the processes of change are taken into account, matters can be considerably less linear and clear cut than they might appear from a simple examination of statistics and other general indicators.

Notes

1. Perry Willson (ed.), *Gender, Family and Sexuality: the Private Sphere in Italy 1860–1945*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2004.
2. The bibliography on this topic has grown enormously in the last few years and is far too large to list here. For a useful list of much of the recently published work in this field see the members' publications section of the website of the Società delle Storiche learned society at www.societàdellestoriche.it. Some idea of the range and type of work currently being done in women's and gender history can also be seen from the papers presented at the third annual conference of this organization in Florence in November 2003. (See the website above for the conference programme.)
3. This journal, the journal of the Società delle Storiche (published by Viella in Rome), is entitled *Genesis*. On its aims and approaches see its first editorial 'Editoriale', *Genesis. Rivista della Società delle Storiche*, 1, 1, 2002, pp. 5–8. See also the review of this first issue by Perry Willson in the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 8, 3, 2003, pp. 444–445. On current approaches to women's and gender history in Italy see Anna Rossi Doria (ed.), *A che punto è la storia delle donne in Italia*, Viella, Rome, 2003.
4. On the importance and role of gender in history see, for example, the much-quoted article by Joan Scott, 'Gender: a Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *American Historical Review*, 91, 5, 1986, pp. 1053–1075. See also Robert Shoemaker and Mary Vincent (eds), *Gender and History in Western Europe*, Arnold, London, 1998.
5. A few pioneering works on this topic have recently been published. See, for example, Angiolina Arru (ed.), *Pater Familias*, Biblink, Rome, 2002; Arru (ed.), *La costruzione dell'identità maschile nell'età moderna e contemporanea*, Biblink, Rome, 2001; Sandro Bellassai and Maria Malatesta (eds), *Genere e mascolinità. Uno sguardo storico*, Bulzoni, Rome, 2000.
6. See, for example, Laura Balbo, *Stato di famiglia*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 1976; Chiara Saraceno, *Pluralità e mutamento*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 1987; Renate Siebert, *'E femmina però è bella': tre generazioni di donne al Sud*, Rosenberg and Sellier, Turin, 1991; Grazia Colombo, Franca Pizzini and Anita Regalia, *Mettere al mondo: la produzione sociale del parto*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 1987.
7. See, for example, Clara Gallini, *Intervista a Maria*, Sellerio, Palermo, 1981; Mariella Pandolfi, *Itinerari delle emozioni: corpo e identità femminile nel Lazio Campano*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 1991; Matilde Callari Galli, *Il tempo delle donne*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1979; Gioia di Cristofaro Longo, *Codice Madre*, Armando, Rome, 1992. On the history of Italian anthropology of Italy see Paola Filippucci, 'Anthropological perspectives on culture in Italy', in David Forgacs and Robert Lumley (eds), *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, pp. 52–71.
8. There is a large body of literature which makes this argument. See, for example, Jane Collier and Sylvia Yanagisako (eds), *Gender and Kinship. Essays towards a Unified Analysis*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1987.
9. On Italian demographic trends in the twentieth century see, for example, Anna Treves, *Le nascite e la politica nell'Italia del Novecento*, LED, Milan, 2001; Massimo Livi Bacci, *A History of Italian Fertility During the Last Two Centuries*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1977.
10. See, for example, Marianne Gullestad and Martine Segalen (eds), *Family and Kinship in Europe*, Pinter, London, 1997.