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Pasta Politics: Politics and Italian food Practice in the Fascist and Post-War Periods

By Nicholas Langer

Garlic & Oil: *Food and Politics in Italy*, by Carol Helstosky, Associate Professor of Modern European, Italian, and Food History at the University of Denver, takes a novel approach to understanding Italian history and politics.¹ Her book is unique in that it examines the effect of political choices on the Italian people through the lenses of food and consumer behavior, an approach to Italian history that before was not systematically examined. The time period which she covers, from the unification of the Italian peninsula through 1960, provides an interesting period through which to view the development of Italian culture into the cohesive and easily recognizable identity—especially food identity—which we see today. It is my contention in the paper that Helstosky’s examination of the relationship between food and politics provides a relevant complement to the economic and political themes commonly discussed regarding fascism and the recovery period.

The central problem on which Helstosky’s thesis centers is the idea that Italian politics both directly and indirectly shaped Italian food and consumer culture. Thus, “[t]he purpose of [her] book is to chart how government interventions created and sustained new consumption situations for Italians,” and she ultimately asserts that “politics shaped the Italian diet.”² The segment of society on which she focuses is the poor, working, and middle classes, as those are the individuals who were most affected by changes in Italian policy. *Garlic & Oil* qualifies as an authoritative historical account of the evolution of Italian food habits due to the rigorous use of primary sources which track the chronology of the influence of Italian politics on food through its chapters. Helstosky harnessed two main bodies of evidence in her research: first, monographs of economic and dietary scholarship contemporary to the period she examines, and second, popular culinary publications—including cookbooks and women’s magazines, also contemporary to the period. From these sources, she also draws many of the statistics that conceptualize nutrition standards in each period. The scholarship allows Helstosky to track the evolution of government food policy while the cookbooks are a reflection of the impact of public policy on the food habits that normal Italians idealized vis-à-vis these publications.

Chapter One begins *Garlic & Oil* by examining the state of Italian nutrition from the time of unification through the beginning of World War One. Helstosky uses this chapter to begin her chronological examination of the political influence of politics on food by “[providing] the context for state intervention in the twentieth century.”³ The chapter opens by “charting the public discourse on food consumption” in the nineteenth century, one which “stressed thrift and renunciation out of necessity.”⁴ This thrift, Helstosky argues, contributed to the unification of Italians through “a monotonous and inadequate diet” that consisted of polenta or hard bread, whose flour was cut with sawdust or dirt to make supplies stretch farther, and that was devoid of

¹ Carol Helstosky. *Garlic and Oil: Food and Politics in Italy*. New York: Berg, 2004.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

³ Helstosky, *Garlic & Oil*, 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

vegetables or animal products.⁵ The rest of the chapter goes on to describe the process through which Italians scraped together the bare means of survival and the impact of this on food culture. The take away from the chapter, though, is the lack of state intervention to improve the quality of Italian diet. This lack of intervention wanes with the beginning of direct state intervention in Italian diet which is discussed in Chapter Two.

In Chapter Two Helstosky discusses the origins of state intervention in Italian diet and the impact of that intervention on consumption habits and the future of politics surrounding food. The Liberal government, which was in power during the First World War, initially adopted policies that devolved regulation methods such as price fixing to the local level, but which eventually transformed into a centralized and “complex wartime bureaucracy.”⁶ This intervention served to “[accustom Italians] to goods like wheat, olive oil, canned tomatoes, and pasta.”⁷ State intervention had raised the standard of Italian food quality to such a point that it would be difficult for Italians to revert back to a lower quality diet. The broader significance of these policies on Italian history can be seen in the contribution of the discontent surrounding the availability of the above food items to the climate which gave rise to fascism.

Chapters Three and Four of *Garlic & Oil* comprise the section in which Helstosky analyzes the relationship between the fascist regime and food policy. Here we see the systematized politicization of food—deliberate use of food to achieve political aims—under the fascist regime at first as a method “of maintaining public order.”⁸ The fascist’s use of food in this way represents a departure from the previous Liberal government. For the fascists, food was used not only as a means to quell unrest, but as a means to form consent.⁹ We can examine the significance of this politicization of food in two important ways.

The first is the degree to which the fascist regime enjoyed the consent of the Italian people. Given that Dylan Riley, in his study of the social foundations of European fascism, argues that “the [Italian] fascist project was concerned with making the modern state more representative of the nation,” we encounter the same contradictions with fascist food policy as we do with fascist political legitimacy, mainly that in both cases citizens were responding to state dictated propaganda.¹⁰ One example of the influence of food related propaganda can be found in the “cooking of consent,” whereby middle-class Italians were placed under pressure to cook in an austere manner which stressed thrift, not out of necessity but for national self-sufficiency.¹¹ These cooking methods were encouraged by numerous cooking magazines and other publications, all of which were part of the regime’s drive towards economic self-sufficiency.¹² It could reasonably be argued, then, that Italian food culture was just as permeated with fascist propaganda and influence as any other part of society. While we can never prove what middle-class housewives thought of food austerity, we can see that Mussolini had turned food into a political tool to develop consensus and manipulate the population.

⁵ Helstosky, *Garlic & Oil*, 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Dylan Riley. *The Civic Foundations of Fascism in Europe: Italy, Spain, and Romania: 1870-1945*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. 11.

¹¹ Helstosky, *Garlic & Oil*, 82.

¹² *Ibid.*

The second way that we see the politicization of food under fascism is in the alteration of the discourse of the academic community, for by the time World War II broke out scientific studies were also in line with the dictates of the fascist regime. The manufacture of consensus among the general population can be seen in the publication of consumer magazines and cookbooks, based on the recommendation of the regime's experts, which advocated consumption habits beneficial to the regime. In previous chapters we saw the scientific community advocating a more varied and higher calorie diet. However, under the fascist regime we see that the scientists at the National Research Council had since directed their research to "determine the minimal nutritional needs of the nation in order to survive a lengthy war" as part of a general effort to "redefine the Italian population according to its labor power...and for the sake of military expediency."¹³ The results of these studies lead to the perpetual rationing of food supplies in Italy in order to facilitate the drive towards self-sufficiency, in addition to giving a de facto prioritization of food supplies to soldiers. This preoccupation with the allotment of food for war reflects the militarization of society and manipulation of scientific discourse in preparation for Mussolini's ill-fated adventures in building an Italian empire.

Chapter Five concludes Helstosky's examination of the relationship between politics and food with an analysis of the Economic Miracle, the revitalization of Italian industry following World War Two. In this chapter she examines the degree to which Americanization influenced Italian food habits and consumer culture. Similar to Paolo Scrivano's observation that post-war standardized housing models based on American designs still "contained pre-war customs," Helstosky observes a resistance to Americanization in Italian eating habits.¹⁴ In this period the government only intervened in Italian food habits for the prevention of malnutrition through state run programs.¹⁵ Popular food habits, then, reflected a preference for the simple foods which they became accustomed to under fascism.¹⁶ These habits were resistant to Americanization for Italians preferred to experiment with snack foods. For their larger meals, Italians mainly bought more of the foods which had been in short supply and signs of social status in previous decades, rather than alter their meals to incorporate American tastes in the form of canned goods and greater meat consumption.¹⁷ Italian consumption habits were essentially driven by "nostalgia for the simple foods of Italy's past" which "grew interest in the nation's regional heritage" of cuisine.¹⁸ Thus, the forced nationalism of the fascist era transformed into a nationalism based on food and Italian culture; this in turn contributed to the relative resistance of Italy to Americanization.

The study of food habits as a reflection of politics was the analytical focus of *Garlic & Oil*. Through this focus Helstosky examined the impact of politics on Italian consumer and food habits from the time of unification through the period of reconstruction and the Economic Miracle. Her analysis of the fascist period reveals that food was among the many devices through which Mussolini sought to manipulate his population and in the post-war period we see the lasting impact of those fascist policies in the resistance to American style consumer practice. In the end, Helstosky's book provides an interesting and valuable angle to think about Italian economics and politics during fascism and the post-war recovery.

¹³Helstosky, *Garlic & Oil*, 92.

¹⁴ Scrivano, Paolo. "Signs of Americanization in Italian Domestic Life: Italy's Postwar Conversion to Consumerism," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40, 2 (2005). 321.

¹⁵ Helstosky, *Garlic & Oil*, 131.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

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