

1 The Nationalization of Women

The generation of Italian women that came of age in the 1930s, as Irene Brin saw it, was "noisy, ingenuous, and sad." Although "frightfully self-conscious about itself," it was a generation "ignorant of being subject to constraints unprecedented in their absoluteness." So exalted was it by "a sense of freedom from all moral, sentimental, and physical bonds that it didn't realize until too late that it had lost its liberty."¹ Brin, an emancipated, rapier-witted journalist who moved easily between Rome, Milan, London, and Paris, was mainly referring to women whom she knew from her own social circles. By and large, they were the offspring of propertied families that had comfortably accommodated themselves to the dictatorship. Born to privilege, they lived insulated from the troubles of Italian working-class women. Nor were they familiar with the existence of rural women, whose habits of life they would only have shrugged off as dismally dull and backward.

Still, Brin's remarks are relevant to the experience of young women of all backgrounds coming of age in Italy during the long years of Mussolini's dictatorship. Their lives were a disconcerting experience of new opportunities and new repressions: they felt the enticement of things modern; they also sensed the drag of tradition. Mussolini's regime stood for returning women to home and hearth, restoring patriarchal authority, and confining female destiny to bearing babies. To be sure, these constraints were not as overtly violent as other state actions in peacetime, including stifling political freedoms and smashing the free trade unions, not to mention the persecution of Italian Jews in the wake of the racial laws of November 1938. It was indeed the apparent normalness of the constraints on women that made them all the more mystifying, insidious, and demeaning. At the same time, the fascist dictatorship celebrated the

Nuova italiana, or "New Italian Woman." Fascism stood just as visibly for the camaraderie of volunteer organizations and for recognizing rights and duties for women in a strong national state. Not least of all, the dictatorship was identified with the physical freedom and more emancipated behaviors associated with the spaces and occasions of modern leisure pastimes. Why a regime that is usually associated with totalitarian repression and utter patriarchal reaction should have been experienced so ambivalently is the subject of this book.

From the start, then, this book tells of the deep conflict within the fascist state between the demands of modernity and the desire to reimpose traditional authority. Benito Mussolini, like Hitler in Nazi Germany, vaunted his ability to promote economic change in order to build up national strength. At the same time, he condemned and sought to forestall the social fallout that, at least since the nineteenth century, had accompanied rapid economic transformations. This conflict was especially visible in the regime's attitudes toward women. On the one hand, fascists condemned all the social practices customarily connected with the emancipation of women—from the vote and female participation in the labor force to family planning. They also sought to extirpate the very attitudes and behaviors of individual self-interest that underlay women's demands for equality and autonomy. On the other hand, fascism, in an effort to build up national economic strength and to mobilize all of Italian society's resources—including the capacity of women to reproduce and nurture—inevitably promoted some of the very changes it sought to curb. Mobilizing politics, modernizing social services, finally, the belligerent militarism of the 1930s, all had the unintended effect of undercutting conservative notions of female roles and family styles. In the process, fascist institutions ordained new kinds of social involvement and recast older notions of maternity and fatherhood, femaleness and masculinity. As in other areas of society, the dictatorship claimed to be restoring the old, when, in spite of itself, it established much that was new.²

Because Italian fascism's positions on women were not merely of its own invention, nor were they, in the last analysis, that distant from the attitudes, policies, and trends prevailing in nonauthoritarian states, they need to be studied in a wider time frame and in comparative context. Mussolini's sexual politics crystalized deep-seated resentments against broader changes in the condition of women in Western societies. These, in turn, were bound up with the final crisis during the Great War of what John Maynard Keynes described in 1919 as the Victorian mode of capital accumulation.³ Reinforced by an ideology of scarcity, Europe's pre-World War I liberal order had progressed by demanding of its subjects strict social disci-

pline and puritanical sexual mores. The exercise of public power was relatively limited, political participation was restricted, and the demands on most subjects were rudimentary, namely that they labor hard, consume minimally, and refrain from making excessive demands on government resources. This order was challenged not least of all by the great emancipatory movement among European women. Already evident in the pre-war suffrage movements, the trend toward female emancipation had deeper wellsprings in the demographic revolution and the spread of liberal ideas in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It became irreversible once millions of women were mobilized in wartime economies and partook thereafter in the manifestly freer sexual and social customs of 1920s mass culture.

At the same time, Western governments were confronting the complex concerns which policymakers addressed under the rubric of the "population problem" or "demographic crisis."⁴ These ran the gamut from fertility decline and what social workers now call "problem families," to male-female job competition and unpredictable consumer behaviors. Practically all of these issues bore on the multiplicity of sometimes incompatible roles women performed in contemporary society—as mothers, wives, citizens, workers, consumers, and clients of social welfare services. The proposed solutions inevitably presented policymakers with a conundrum, which the Swedish sociologist and social reformer Alva Myrdal summed up in an incisive phrase: "One sex [women] a social problem."⁵

In the interwar decades, all Western governments reacted to this double challenge of democratization and demographic crisis. They responded at first by sanctioning female suffrage, and then by developing new public discourses about women, legislating about their place in the labor market, and recodifying family policies. A restructuring of gender relations thus went hand in hand with the recasting of economic and political institutions to secure conservative interests in the face of economic uncertainty and the democratization of public life.⁶ In no previous period did state action focus so intensely on institutionalizing what Michel Foucault has called "the government of life."⁷ Never before was the sphere of gender relations more explicitly the focus of reformist zeal. However, both the scope and outcome of policies differed from country to country. In the state-interventionist capitalism which emerged everywhere in Western societies during the two decades between the World Wars, decisions were made about whether government policies would take an authoritarian or democratic cast, repress labor or coopt it, allow women greater freedom or impose more restrictions on them. By and large, the outcomes varied according to the character of the class coalitions in power and their stands on broad issues of social welfare and economic redistribution.

In fascist Italy (and, later, arguably, in Nazi Germany as well), government addressed the double issue of population politics and female emancipation by exploiting longstanding traditions of mercantilist thinking. These traditions had acquired renewed currency from the 1870s onward as European elites, reacting to heightened international competition and growing class conflicts, sought to protect domestic markets from foreign goods and build up export capacity. Like their eighteenth-century forebears, who theorized the need for a "multitude of laborious poor," neo-mercantilists worried about optimizing population size to supply cheap labor, satisfy military needs, and keep up home demand.⁸ By the turn of the twentieth century, these concerns became complicated by additional worries: declining fertility rates, ethnic minorities whose racial characteristics and nationalist strivings allegedly undermined national-state identity, and, finally, internal fertility differentials that threatened the proliferation of the least fit while the elites dwindled away. By the eve of the Great War, a new biological politics was emerging, permeated with social Darwinist notions of life as a deadly struggle for existence. Eugenicist and social welfare programs were proposed to serve two principal ends of state policy: to buttress declining power in the international field and to secure control over home populations. Insofar as ethnic diversity and female emancipation were identified as obstacles to success, biological politics was easily fused with antifeminism and anti-Semitism.

The integrally authoritarian and antifeminist character of Italian fascism's response to the population question becomes clearer when contrasted to what contemporary observers saw as its virtual opposite, the population policy formulated by Sweden's social democrats. Having won the 1932 elections, the social democrats established the Royal Commission on the Swedish Population Problem in 1935; after consolidating its majority in both houses of parliament in 1936, the party set the agenda for the "mothers and babies session" of the national legislature the following year. Sweden's social democrats were at least as conscious as the Italian fascist elite of the importance of population to maintaining state power, Sweden itself having just 6.2 million inhabitants in 1933. And to overcome the "crisis" caused by declining fertility rates, the Swedish state was just as willing to overrule the distinctions between public power and individual interest and between state rule and family authority that had guided liberal conceptions of politics and gender relations in the nineteenth century.

Beyond that, there was little similarity. The Swedish social democrats, backed by a broad-based liberal coalition that included farmers and feminists as well as labor, tied the goal of population stability and fitness to a

broad program of social and economic reform. Swedish population politics presumed a "mild form of nationalism," as was consistent with Sweden's openness to the international economy. But as the chief architects of policy Gunnar and Alva Myrdal explained, the government had to find non-coercive ways "to get a people to abstain from not reproducing itself."⁹ Reforms were the main means by which the Swedish government sought to persuade its people to reproduce. With the same spirit of redistributive justice that inspired higher wages and tariff protection for farmers, the government socialized certain important aspects of consumption in order to equalize the burdens of bringing up children. The chief provisions were services in kind, from low-cost housing to free school lunches. The state also affirmed its interest in replacing patriarchal family structures with more rational, efficient, and equitable means of helping women to balance weighty and sometimes incompatible burdens as wives, mothers, workers, and citizens. Social policy thus implied that women still bore the main burden for bearing and rearing children, but the state would help women make the choice to have children less arbitrary and the task of raising them less onerous. Hence, women were encouraged to work as well as to have children, abortion was legalized, and birth control and sex education were widely promoted on the grounds that births be neither "undesired" nor "undesirable."¹⁰

By contrast, fascist Italy cast the population issue in terms of quantity rather than quality. Citing the overriding national interest, the state declared itself the sole arbiter of population fitness. Hence, on principle, it denied women any role in decisions regarding childbearing. Indeed, on population issues, women were presumed to be antagonists of the state, acting solely on the family's interest without regard for the nation's needs. Seeking to compel women to have more children, the state banned abortion, the sale of contraceptive devices, and sex education. At the same time, the fascist state favored men at the expense of women in the family structure, the labor market, the political system, and society at large. It did so by exploiting the vast machinery of political and social control that had made it possible in the first place to shift the burden of economic growth to the least advantaged members of society. In sum, by foreclosing reforms and by aggravating economic insecurity and social inequalities, fascist policy may actually have increased deterrents to childbearing and heightened fertility differentials between urban and rural areas.

In the context of these broader changes, this book addresses how the Duce's regime sought to define the rights and duties of Italian women in

relation to the national state. My contention is that Mussolini's government sought to nationalize Italian women, much as during the previous century, in Italy and elsewhere, bourgeois governments sought to nationalize men. At least until the second half of the nineteenth century, most Europeans remained marginal to the political process, even those in societies with liberal constitutions. Excluded from the formal political system, they were nonetheless socialized through the civic culture to fulfill their duty to the state.¹¹ Through schooling, military training, and public rituals, the political elites, entrepreneurs, and social reformers sought to impress on their compatriots the civic obligations, collective virtues, and personal values required for citizenship in nation-states embattled in an increasingly competitive world system. Up until the early twentieth century, however, "nationalizing the masses" largely referred to *male* subjects: the creation of hardened soldiers, dutiful taxpayers, disciplined workers, thrifty consumers, and, ultimately, of course, predictable voters. By and large, women were excluded from those domains of concern, especially in Europe's peripheral areas.

Indeed, the effort to involve men in the duties of bourgeois nationhood was everywhere premised on institutionalizing the separateness of women's domain of action. In the high Victorian model of late nineteenth-century Europe, the destiny of nations was considered to rest on manly skills and the virtues of the soldier-citizen, whereas women nurtured the values of privacy. The male purview was the public, and the man's voice articulated political sentiment; the female was the pillar of the household, and her voice expressed intimacy. Virility was publicized and glorified; femaleness was castigated and idealized. As the family was singled out to uphold distinctions of rank and status, women—middle-class women in particular—were removed from active life outside the household and entrusted with the constitution and care of the home.¹²

This tidy assignment of gender roles, if never more than a historical tendency, became harder to sustain everywhere by the turn of the twentieth century. Faced with sharpening rivalries abroad and growing social conflicts at home, liberal states demanded more from their citizens, becoming less tolerant of diversity and deviance. Sexual conduct hitherto unremarked upon was now classified as normal or deviant; if suspected to be the latter, it was treated as a source of social disturbance, hence subject to surveillance and to political repression. The pressures on the family to uphold respectability intensified. The female networking which, in Catholic countries especially, underlay suspect social movements and religious traditions appeared less manageable.¹³ The suffrage movement that cropped up in Italy as well as in more advanced nations after the turn of the cen-

ture clashed with male common wisdom about the natural political order of society. Finally, declining birth rates, which seemed to undercut national strength in an imperialistic world system, became the focus of apprehensive comment.¹⁴

That women performed an absolutely central, yet strikingly complex role in sustaining state power became manifest in the course of the Great War. In Italy, as in other belligerent nations, women were mobilized to an unprecedented degree. In urban areas they filled the munitions industries and staffed government bureaucracies and commercial offices. In rural communities they worked the fields, tended the animals, and managed relations with a more intrusive and helping national government. Upper-class women volunteered for service in the Red Cross or joined the patriotic-emancipationist National Council of Italian Women. During the war's course, Italian women built up networks, acquired professional self-confidence and work skills, and grew knowledgeable about the operations of state institutions. After the war, it seemed that in compensation for their services and sacrifice, they would acquire citizenship status equal to men, including parity in the labor market, the right to vote, and public recognition of their myriad contributions to Italian society.

As it turned out, the "nationalization" of women in Italy occurred under authoritarian, not liberal, terms. Fascism took as axiomatic that women and men were different by nature. The government politicized this difference to the advantage of males and made it the cornerstone of an especially repressive, comprehensive new system for defining female citizenship, for governing women's sexuality, wage labor, and social participation. Every aspect of being female was thus held up to the measure of the state's interest and interpreted in light of the dictatorship's strategies of state building. In this system, recognition of women's rights as citizens went hand in hand with the denial of female emancipation; reforms on behalf of the welfare of women and children were bound up with brutal restraints.

To argue that the dictatorship "nationalized" Italian women is not to say that the fascist movement itself had any ready-made stance on "the woman question" when Mussolini became prime minister in 1922. Policies on women's issues coalesced much more haltingly than policies on culture or policies on labor. Not until its third year in power did the government make its first reform in the area of women's concerns: the establishment of the national agency ONMI (*Opera nazionale per la maternità ed infanzia*) to oversee maternal and infant welfare. And not until two years later, in 1927, did the Duce launch his campaign to increase Italian birthrates. The first significant effort to establish a range of special

political organizations for women occurred only in the course of the early 1930s, as fascism "reached out to the people" to still unrest caused by the Great Depression. The rallying of phalanxes of black-shirted women, the laws against miscegenation, the persecution of non-Aryans, and the publication of draconian statutes to drive women from the workforce were all measures taken after 1935, as the Italian military machine geared up for war and the example of Nazi sexual and racial politics became well known to fascist leaders.

This is not to say that there was no system to fascist rule. Ultimately, the various actions the fascist regime took to consolidate its power determined the overall patterns of how Italian women were treated in interwar society. During the first half of the 1920s, fascism grew from a splinter social movement in search of a constituency into a single-party government. An authoritarian regime with shallow roots in civil society through the late 1920s, it became a mass-based state with totalitarian pretensions in the 1930s. Laissez-faire at the outset, the dictatorship's economic policy became neomercantilist in the late 1920s; later, in the wake of the Depression and the Ethiopian war in 1936, it pursued full-fledged autarchy. This evolution was premised on and confirmed the dictatorship's alliances with big business, the large landed proprietors, the military establishment, the monarchy, and the Catholic Church. In turn, the dictatorship subjected the Fascist party to the central state bureaucracy. Mussolini then used the PNF (*Partito nazionale fascista*) to reach out to social groups—workers, peasants, and small entrepreneurs—whose interests were either ignored or systematically violated in the economic realm, seeking to integrate them into a broad if superficial political consensus.

To secure this conservative alliance, the dictatorship put unrelenting pressure on wages and consumption. The Italian economy was especially vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the international economy: Italian agriculture was backward, and the industrial sector imported raw materials and producer goods while exporting textiles. By squeezing wages and curbing purchasing power—steps made possible only by the suppression of the socialist labor movement in the early 1920s—the dictatorship was able to revalue the currency in 1927. A stronger lira, along with other measures, lowered the costs of imported goods, made Italy an attractive place for foreign (especially U.S.) lenders, promoted industrial restructuring, and boosted state-backed electrification and land-reclamation programs. Development proceeded in the 1930s, accentuating the dualistic nature of the Italian economy. At one extreme, it was characterized by inefficient agriculture and a broad strata of small businesses, the precarious status of which was belied by official paeans to antiurban ideologies;

at the other, by a highly concentrated industrial establishment, bailed out by state aid and stimulated by rearmament after 1933. Meanwhile, labor's share of national income continued to shrink. One indicator of fascism's "low-wage" economy was that in 1938 real incomes for industrial workers were still 3 percent short of their 1929 level and 26 percent lower than their postwar peak in 1921. As late as 1938, over one half of the average family's income was spent on food (compared to 25 percent in the United States). All told, Italy was the only industrialized country in which wages fell continuously from the start of the 1920s through the outbreak of World War II. The standard of living, as measured by food budgets, purchase of consumer durables, and availability of public services, put Italy well behind other industrialized nations.¹⁵

Mussolini's strategies of regime building inevitably had far-reaching repercussions on the situation of Italian women, in particular on the working-class and peasant majority. To pursue its population politics, fascism sought to establish more control over female bodies, especially female reproductive functions, at the same time that it sought to rehabilitate older patriarchal notions of family and paternal authority. To sustain its pressure on wages and consumption, the dictatorship exploited household economic resources to an unusual degree for a country well advanced on the path of industrialization: it demanded that women act as careful consumers, efficient household managers, and astute clients to squeeze services out of an ever-stinting social welfare system, in addition to being part-time, oftentimes concealed wage earners who rounded out family incomes. To curb the use of cheap female labor in the face of high male unemployment, yet maintain Italian industry's reserve force of low-cost workers, the regime devised an elaborate system of protections and prohibitions regulating the exploitation of female labor. Finally, to make women responsive to the increasingly complex claims on them, as well as to exploit women's pent-up desire to identify with and serve the national community, the regime walked the thin line between modernity and emancipation. Thus it devised new kinds of organizations to satisfy the desire for social engagement, while repressing the female solidarities, individualist values, and political freedoms once promoted by feminist associations.

To know the intentions of fascist sexual politics is not necessarily to know its outcome. Mussolini's state was a totalitarian regime to the extent that he, like his nationalist counselors, believed in obliterating the distinction between public and private and between central government and civil society. However, national identity is a complicated construction, and no regime, not even an avowedly totalitarian one, exists in a

social vacuum such that it can implement programs as it sees fit. In Italy, fascist policies toward women were at every moment conditioned by the legacy of institutions the dictatorship inherited from the liberal state, as well as by the economic, social, and cultural environments in which its own strategies of rule were designed and put into effect.

On coming to power, the fascists faced a society in which the benefits of growth were unevenly distributed. If the economy was to grow, changes had to be made in the labor market. Work-force participation tended to acquire a more typically modern face, which meant that women would move from agriculture and light industry into heavy manufacture, commercial establishments, and government offices. Economic development also entailed urbanization and the separation of the worksite from the home. Some women would become more isolated in domesticity, but many more would be drawn into the freer sociability of urban life. Finally, economic development was accompanied by the rise of mass consumption, associated with American models of consumer culture. Radio, cinema, department stores, women's tabloids, and fan magazines offered new styles of group and individual expression, new models of living, and new outlets for disposable income. The fascist regime could try to forestall these trends. Or it could attempt to exploit the unevenness of their impact on a society in which there were acute differences in sexual mores and cultural habits between city and countryside and between north and south. But ultimately the regime was unable to stop their advance. How the fascist regime sought to interpret and manipulate the meaning of the habits and pastimes associated with the rise of mass culture is an important theme of this study.

Italian Catholicism was another major force with which fascism had to contend. The once-atheistic Duce's attempts to pacify the Church are well known, as are the sometimes furious rivalries between local Catholic groups and fascism's own party organizations. But in the lives of many Italian women, the renascence of Catholicism in public life signified something more profound than conservative compromise between church and state. From the early 1920s, and particularly after 1926, when ceremonies in honor of the seventh centennial of the death of Saint Francis occasioned a huge mobilization of Church forces, Italian Catholicism mounted a veritable counterreformation. Sensitized to the allure and dangers of modern fashion, the mass media, and urbanized sexual behaviors, Church institutions shaped new female role models and new moral codes. To do so, they drew on zealous professionals, congregations of the faithful, and a far-flung, well-established press. They also benefited from the considerable social-scientific skills of experts who gathered around Father Ago-

stino Gemelli, rector and founder of the Catholic University of Milan. After 1929, following the Lateran Accords between the Vatican and the Italian state, Catholic propagandists pursued their work through the state school system. Always, Church positions on women had the coherence of dogma and tradition. They were indeed formidable ideological fallbacks when fascism's own secular logic supporting the subordination of women failed to convince.

To rule its female subjects, the regime, of course, had also to contend with the attitudes of women themselves. Some female views were clearly articulated by urbane and cultured women in published accounts of their political involvement, intellectual enterprises, and social undertakings. Italy's middle-class feminist associations, though not especially cohesive or widely supported before the fascists' March on Rome in 1922, survived for over a decade after Mussolini came to power. Forced to give up on the issue of suffrage after 1925, one-time feminists redoubled their activities as social volunteers or turned to cultural pursuits, building up a new national women's subculture. Throughout the West, World War I had caused a social earthquake, dividing older and younger women. Fascism only accentuated this division by its incessant denunciations of the "demoliberal" past, by its exaltation of youth, and by its censure of female emancipation as *démodé*, spinsterish, and foreign-born. Italian emancipationists, like those elsewhere, had had to come to terms with postwar society's "new" women. More difficult still, Italian feminists then had to come to terms with Mussolini's regime in all of its bluster, manipulativeness, and complication. They had to learn how to relate to its male hierarchies and militaristic posturing; how to respond to its biological determinism and narrowly conceived maternalist ideology; how to link the voluntary work they practiced under the aegis of feminist or Catholic networks to intrusive new state social welfare bureaucracies and the allegedly scientific practices of professional social workers.

The attitudes of the unorganized, insofar as they can be determined, likewise illustrate that Italian women were not passive subjects, much less hapless victims, of the dictatorship. They were protagonists; they made choices. True, these were limited choices. Women were constrained not only by market pressures and by the dead hand of tradition—which even in freer societies weighed so heavily on women's freedoms—but also by the flagrant legal discrimination imposed by the dictatorship. How women negotiated these choices is harder to document than the fact that they made them, for the preponderance of written sources echo male anxieties rather than voice women's concerns.

All of this is to preface one key point: how fascism ruled Italian women

is also the story of how Italian women experienced fascist rule. At one level, the ways in which Italian women related to their families, to their society, and to each other were the outcome of the myriad policies which shaped family planning, the labor market, educational opportunities, and public attitudes. At another level, they were the result of women's own actions: in particular, how they responded collectively and individually to enticing new habits of mass consumption, to changing standards of family and child care, and to the novel occasions of sociability offered by the fascist auxiliaries, as well as by Catholic women's groups, informal neighborhood networks, and the several surviving feminist clubs. As we come to see how Italian women shared information among themselves—about sentiments, sexuality, family, and work—their responses to fascist rule appear more complex than the attitudes commonly ascribed to them, namely, passive subordination or delirious enthusiasm. Among Italian women there was disquiet, rebelliousness, dissimulation, and shrewd manipulation, together with a newly arising consciousness of their rights as women and as citizens of Italy.

To speak of all Italian women with a single voice is of course to oversimplify, just as it would be to speak of a coherent fascist program toward women. There were differences of class and custom: in Florence, one might encounter young companionate couples in the Anglo-American style, whereas in rural districts barely outside of the city limits, the sharecropper *capoccia* ruled his female family members in the manner of an absolute patriarch. At newspaper kiosks in Turin, newly urbanized servant girls were buying American-style fan magazines, while their staunchly Catholic *padrone*, accompanied by their elder daughters, were absorbed in devotionals of the Cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Loquacious, cosmopolitan women gathered in the refined salons of Milan and Rome. Speeding over country roads, the Fiat *Ardita* roadsters advertised as the car of these elegant "new women" blasted dust over mute, prematurely aged peasant women.

Italian women had enormously different experiences of maternity as well. The black-swathed rural proletarians; the dazzling writer Margherita Sarfatti, social doyenne of Rome's most powerful intellectual salon; or a chief supervisor of fascist feminism, the Genoese aristocrat Olga Medici Del Vescello, seemed to have had only their sex in common. Yet, they were divided even by that. The emancipated city dweller with two or three children or even none was separated from the peasant woman with a family of six or more not only by class, education, and tradition, but more profoundly by the single fact of life that ostensibly bound them to-

gether—the act and consequences of childbearing. Generational differences were at least as important. As one cohort of women reached midlife in the 1930s and another came to adulthood, their mutual incomprehension was accentuated by their different experience of mass culture and by the fascist dictatorship's cult of youth.

Still, these distinctions pale in the face of fascism's gender-based system of exploitation and the misogyny it sanctioned. Class differences among women were as sharp as ever under the fascist regime, and the fascists exploited the diversity of social mores and sexual behaviors to isolate upper- and lower-class women from one another. The regime's social provisions mainly affected women of the lower classes; for abnormalities in the condition of their families were most likely to attract busybody social workers, and they were the most needy and had the fewest alternative sources of aid. But no matter how highly placed the women were, or how personally secure, none were impervious to the antifemale policies of the regime. Keeping in mind class distinctions, along with differences of age and geographical provenance, I have sought here to document how official policies, reinforced by stereotypes circulated through the mass media, standardized public discourse about women. Yet this tendency should not prevent us from underscoring what might seem its opposite: the very effort on the part of the dictatorship to nationalize its female subjects eventually caused the proliferation of alternative identities, in particular those associated with Catholic, youth, and left-wing oppositional cultures.

To capture the diversity of female experience, while suggesting how fascism overtly and subtly shaped new notions of womanhood and citizenship among its female subjects, means breaking with certain conventions common in the study of Mussolini's rule. Take the question, "Did women back the fascist dictatorship?" If support is intended to mean consensus, the question is moot, for under an authoritarian government, people were not free to express their opinions.¹⁶ Fluctuations of outlook were of course registered in police and other official records and by the ebb and flow of membership in mass institutions, as well as by means of the rough registers of opinion compiled by clandestine resistance groups. But unlike the male working class, for whom the fascist trade unions and labor courts acted as sounding boards of sorts, women had no special grievance mechanisms through which to signal their interests or register their complaints. And whereas officials were attentive to working-class opinion, and they claimed to listen to the rural voice, they never solicited information about female opinion. Moreover, in their relations with central

authority, fascist women affected a conspicuously stoical attitude, either to win praise for silent self-sacrifice or to stave off interference from male officialdom.

In the absence of evidence, one might conclude that the overriding majority of women respected the regime. Even further, it might be argued that by the mid-1930s, female constituencies were especially susceptible to the quasi-religious cult of *Ducismo*. Yet what did this signify more concretely? Did such attitudes preclude a distaste for demographic politics, a horror of war, or antipathy to fascism's anti-Semitic legislation? Were these the same women who later refused to end hoarding, volunteer sons for the draft, or outfit their men for wartime labor service in the German camps? Gramsci's notion of "contradictory consciousness" usefully underscores the complexity of belief systems and the difficulty of probing the way subaltern groups come to terms with the dominant order.¹⁷ Honor for the Duce could go hand in hand with the ridicule of official prescriptions on female conduct. Sacrificing gold and silver marriage rings in the huge scrap-metal collections organized to further the Ethiopian war effort went along with the outright flouting of the regime's demographic programs. The family could be more permeable to state interference at the same time that its behavior became more privatized in order to resist the mounting pressures of a bellicose regime.

The second convention called into question regards the modernity of fascism. Propagandists boasted that fascism's treatment of women was both "modern" and "traditional"; indeed, the fusing of the past with the present, the old with the new, was bruited to be among the new era's most magnificent achievements. It is tempting to accept these particular fascist claims, and many have done so. The fact that women went to public rallies, young girls were massed in calisthenics on Fascist Saturday, and rural housewives paraded their hens and rabbits in photographs would seem to document the regime's modernity. Likewise, the fact that the regime recognized that women were important to the state, defining their rights and duties within it, might be interpreted as a signal of progress. Yet the argument that fascism modernized female roles—an argument common to both liberal and Marxist interpretations of the dictatorship's impact on women—rests on three wrong assumptions. First, it presumes that before fascism, women were unorganized. This of course was not the case: large numbers of women were involved in Catholic, socialist, and bourgeois feminist organizations, not to mention informal solidarities of all kinds. Second, it identifies modernity with presence in the public sphere, treating the private sphere as *ipso facto* backward. Under this misconception, the presence of women publicly organized under fascism is viewed

as a progressive measure, regardless of its reactionary ends. Third, it presumes that involvement in political organizations, even fascist ones, is more influential than other modes of socialization in shaping perceptions of social order.¹⁸

Instead, the transformation of women's political culture must be understood more broadly, in order to consider not just what fascism wanted from its women's groups, but how women related their individual goals, family needs, and social commitments to the dominant political beliefs and institutions. Mussolini's dictatorship redefined the boundaries between public and private, thereby altering the relations between state intervention and individual initiative and between collective engagements and private lives. In response, intellectual women sought new outlets of self-expression, for example, in writing fiction or embellishing their homes. In fascist Italy, we thus find that the changes in women's lives derived as much from the novel ways in which women experienced feelings, needs, and pastimes normally identified with the private sphere as from their more visible presence in the public world of commercial pastimes, sports events, or mass rallies. Viewed in this light, Italian women's lives in the interwar years were akin to those of women elsewhere. The signal difference was that the fascist dictatorship sought as systematically as possible to prevent Italian women from experiencing these occasions as moments of individual, much less collective, emancipation.

Finally, there is the convention of periodization. The history of the dictatorship is now customarily divided into two broad periods: the 1920s, with the seizure of power, and the 1930s, during which the fascist state extended outward to build up a wide base of popular support.¹⁹ This dating follows naturally from the rhythms of the economy and political society and provides a necessary framework for identifying turning points in state policy toward women. Other significant changes, however, proceeded at a slower pace, beginning and ending outside the Duce's reign: such were structural changes in labor markets, long-term shifts in demographic rates, the seeming immobility of national customs and character, and the decades-long transition in models of family life. From the perspective of these changes, fascism itself at times seems almost an irrelevant factor, as if we were telling the story of a repressive system that was ordained well before the Duce seized power and came to an end well after his catastrophic fall. Yet fascism was no mere political postiche to top the balding patches of age-old patriarchy. As a system of rule, it both responded to and determined profound changes in the condition of Italian women and society in the first half of this century.

In the last analysis, the question of how fascism ruled Italian women

is more than the history of the half left out. The crisis of the gender order in liberal Italy was part and parcel of the crisis of the liberal system as a whole. For the prescient liberal social theorist Vilfredo Pareto, the readiness of the Italian political elite to capitulate to what he called in 1914 the "virtuist myth" was a sure sign of the frailty of its rule.²⁰ By caving in to private notions of virtue, having even considered passing laws that treated a "pathological sense of shame" as if it were a universal moral value, Italy's liberal government was repudiating the laissez-faire principles that had hitherto been its strength. The target of court rulings, proposed obscenity laws, and government circulars was sexual behavior, and the major offenders were women. Some twenty-four years later, in a book that would be widely quoted, an ambitious young fascist ideologue named Ferdinando Loffredo contended that the Duce needed a coherent sexual politics to perfect his totalitarian rule.²¹ Loffredo cheered the dictatorship for having brought order out of economic chaos, lauded it for having forced Italians to respect the sovereign authority of the nation, and praised it for having inculcated a fervid love of country; but he was perplexed that the dictatorship seemed at an impasse before the intractable individualism of family life and moral conduct. The best evidence was the regime's inability to ban women from the workforce and thrust them back into the household. Indeed, its measures on behalf of economic development and political mobilization fostered an individualist reaction against state interference that accentuated notions of private interest. By Loffredo's account, the gender of that resistance was female.

The order of this book's subsequent chapters is intended to reflect how the dictatorship impinged on women's lives and to single out the numerous ways in which the various moments of their existence, from maternity to political involvement, interacted and changed during the interwar years. Chapter 2 speaks to the liberal legacy, in particular to how the newly emerging fascist movement exploited the liberal state's neglect of issues regarding women and motherhood. Chapter 3 deals with motherhood and maternity, how the dictatorship redefined the meaning of child-bearing in a time of rapid demographic change and how, in turn, Italian women, responding to government, professional, and Church pressures, redefined for themselves what it meant to be a mother. Chapter 4 focuses on family life, how it was experienced as families were stripped of old responsibilities and acquired new duties toward the state. Chapter 5 is about growing up; it highlights the new ideals of girlhood at a time in which Catholic, fascist, and commercial models of conduct competed intensely to shape young women's perceptions of themselves and their so-