

FROM MALTHUS TO MUSSOLINI:  
*The Italian Eugenics Movement and Fascist Population Policy,*  
1890-1938

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the origins and impact of fascist population policy. The 'battle for the birthrate' inspired major social and institutional reforms under the dictatorship. Yet the question of why the regime should embark upon a pronatalist campaign remains largely unexplored.

The study traces the origins of Mussolini's demographic campaign to the eugenics movement. This thesis begins with an analysis of the meaning of race in Italian scientific culture. A central concern is to show how the debates of prewar science shaped the agenda set by the fascist regime. The first part of this thesis is devoted to a discussion of the theories of prominent eugenicists. Their arguments provide the key to understanding the wider aims of the Duce's plans for state intervention to boost the birthrate.

The thesis then proceeds to an examination of policy implementation. Welfare programmes stood at the centre of fascist population policy. The regime sought to provide encouragements to Italians to increase their reproductive output in the form of substantial health reforms. The second part of the thesis explores the institutional development of the National Organisation for the Protection of Motherhood and Infancy. Created in 1925, ONMI established Italy's first comprehensive national health service for women and children. This section seeks to assess whether the regime built a viable and efficient state apparatus for the mass organisation of welfare.

The third part of this thesis takes a closer look at public provision. As a considerable part of ONMI's budget was spent on a campaign to reduce levels of maternal abandonment, this section explores the impact of illegitimacy policy. To assess more fully the achievements of fascist welfare policy, the thesis attempts to describe the continuities and changes in state administration of social assistance from liberalism to fascism. One aim is to uncover the legacy of Church charity in a Catholic country with a rich beneficent heritage. The transformation of pious institutions into a system of public welfare proceeded very haphazardly in Italy. The liberal state proved too timid a force for the unruly network of private charities which proliferated throughout the kingdom. This thesis will argue that fascism failed to consolidate this inheri-

tance into a tight and efficient system of social services. The pattern of welfare development during the fascist period shows how uneasy and uneven institutional growth remained even under a centralising and modernising dictatorship.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

### I. Archival Sources

ACR, ASS	Archivio del Comune di Roma, Assistenza e Servizi Sociali
ACS	Archivio Centrale dello Stato
ASA	Archivio di Stato di Alessandria
ASCP	Archivio Storico Civico, Comune di Pavia
ASCR	Archivio Storico Capitolino, Comune di Roma
ASF	Archivio di Stato di Ferrara
ASM	Archivio di Stato di Milano
ASN	Archivio di Stato di Novara
AST	Archivio di Stato di Torino
ASV	Archivio di Stato di Vercelli
IPAI I	Archivio dell'Istituto Provinciale di Assistenza all'Infanzia Illegittima, Provincia di Roma
WI	The Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine

### A. References to single holdings and their sub-divisions by category in the Archivio Centrale dello Stato and elsewhere:

AA	Atti Amministrativi
AC	Atti Contabili
AG	Affari Generali
B	Beneficenza
CO	Carteggio Ordinario
CR	Carteggio Riservato
CS	Cartelle Speciali
D	Direttorio Nazionale
DGP	Direzione Generale del Personale
G	Gabinetto
GP	Gabinetto della Prefettura
OP	Opere Pie
P	Prefettura
PG	Pratiche Generali
Q	Questura
SA	Servizi Amministrativi
SCN	Senatori e Consiglieri Nazionali

**B. The archives and official publications of public institutions and political organisations:**

<b>Min. AIC</b>	Ministero di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio
<b>Min. GG</b>	Ministero di Grazia e Giustizia
<b>Min. Interno</b>	Ministero dell'Interno,
<b>GB</b>	Gabinetto Buffarini
<b>CR</b>	Commissioni Reali, Inchieste
<b>DGAC</b>	Direzione Generale dell'Amministrazione Civile
<b>DGSP</b>	Direzione Generale della Sanità Pubblica
<b>Min. LPS</b>	Ministero del Lavoro e Previdenza Sociale
<b>PCM</b>	Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri
<b>PNF</b>	Partito Nazionale Fascista
<b>SPD</b>	Segreteria Particolare del Duce, 1922-1943

b. box; f. folder; m. bundle (mazzo); P. protocol;  
p. pack (pacco); sf. sub-file

**II. Government Bodies and Interest Groups**

<b>CISP</b>	Comitato Italiano per lo Studio dei Problemi della Popolazione
<b>ENRISI</b>	Ente Nazionale Risi
<b>ISTAT</b>	Istituto Centrale di Statistica del Regno d'Italia
<b>ONMI</b>	Opera Nazionale per la Protezione della Maternità e dell'Infanzia

**III. References to Journals**

<b>Aac</b>	<i>Archivio di Antropologia Criminale Psichiatria e Medicina Legale (second series, 1909-1949)</i>
<b>MI</b>	<i>Maternità ed Infanzia</i>

**IV. Parliamentary Series**

<b>ApC</b>	<i>Atti parlamenari, Camera dei Deputati</i>
<b>ApS</b>	<i>Atti parlamentari, Senato</i>
<b>Legis.</b>	Legislatura
<b>Sess.</b>	Sessione

## INTRODUCTION

The Ascension Day Speech of 26 May 1927 marked the foundation of fascist dictatorship in Italy. In this parliamentary address, Mussolini defined the objectives of his regime. The Duce promised to "cure the race" of all its "symptoms of moral and physical decadence". He proclaimed himself to be the nation's "physican" who had a therapeutic mission to regenerate the race. Chief among his ambitions stood the goal of population increase. Italy's "cribs lay empty", he pronounced, "while the country's cemeteries grow full". He placed the kingdom's vital statistics on a demographic battlefield with those of his European neighbours. Forty million Italians compared unfavourably with 90 million Germans and 200 million Slavs. France loomed as a mighty military power with a combined colonial and indigeneous population which numbered over 130 million people. And the British ruled over a huge empire whose combined force of almost 500 million inhabitants could be mobilised to defend the realm.<sup>1</sup> The sheer size of the armies other nations could muster proved a disquieting thought for a dictator with expansionist aims.

The Duce planned to increase the population to 60 million by the year 1950. Mussolini had formerly believed in the doctrine of overpopulation, espoused by Italian followers of Thomas Robert Malthus.<sup>2</sup> He explained to those assembled to celebrate the "birth" of fascism in March 1919 that continued population increase would cause misery and hunger because of the poverty of Italy's economic endowments.<sup>3</sup> As late as December 1924, Mussolini complained of the nation's deficiencies of land and resources as a natural hindrance to demographic increment. A poor country unable to feed and employ its people, Italy could ill afford to sustain an annual increase of over 440,000 people, he asserted to the Senate.<sup>4</sup>

In his address on Ascension Day in 1927, Mussolini repudiated these earlier statements. He now argued that a nation transformed by fascism could comfortably accommodate at least ten million more citizens. Rural development schemes would make Italy "unrecognisable in ten years' time". Reclamation projects to clear cultivable soil and agrarian reform to modernise the *mezzadria* would propel agricultural output and lead to national self-sufficiency in food production. And a future empire would absorb any excess population in colonial

settlements.<sup>5</sup>

In his famous essay entitled *Numbers as Force*, which first appeared in *Gerarchia* in September 1928, Mussolini continued his attacks on "malthusianism". Contrary to the outmoded ideas of an Anglican clergyman who wrote over a century ago, he argued, population increment would not cause unemployment to rise or famine to ensue. In his estimation, fewer workers spelled economic stagnation and industrial decline. One of the most troubling weaknesses of the Italian economy, chronic underconsumption, Mussolini claimed, was a symptom of the failure of demographic expansion to keep pace with economic progress. While the nation's factories reeled off goods at a quickening rate, a sullen birthrate stunted the growth of a home market. On the question of living standards, the Duce remarked that Italy's 42 million people now lived better and longer in 1928 than the country's 27 million residents had done back in 1871. By increasing national wealth and manufacturing productivity, sustained population growth, Mussolini affirmed confidently, would generate progressive improvements in the health and welfare of all Italians.<sup>6</sup>

The Duce matched these optimistic appraisals of the impact of population growth with a gloomy outlook on actual demographic trends. Although still vigorous and virile, he warned, Italians showed symptoms of demographic degeneration in a waning birthrate. The fall of great civilisations in history, he commented, almost always coincided with a nadir in natality. He described "population prolificity" as a "political force" and envisaged an imminent reproductive war between races which superior species were destined to lose because of their reluctance to breed. While the white races of the West seemed threatened with extinction, the yellow and coloured races of Africa and the East propagated energetically. In the foreseeable future, he averred, inferior peoples would invade and conquer Europe. Through intermixture with their bad blood, the white race would grow weaker still and eventually die out.<sup>7</sup>

Steady decline in the birthrate caused a latent crisis which fascism hoped to remedy in tempestive and aggressive state interventions to increase fertility. The "first phase" of the regime's demographic campaign, Mussolini explained in his Ascension Speech, aimed to achieve a "*massimo di natalità*" and a "*minimo di mortalità*".<sup>8</sup> The fascist government, he announced, would intensify the struggle



against drugs, malaria, tuberculosis, alcoholism, cancer, suicide, mental deficiency, vandalism, spitting, and all other maladies afflicting the race. Along with progressive measures to improve race hygiene, repressive enactments against the social contagion of sterility promised to persuade Italians to become more prolific. The celibacy tax on bachelors and future financial levies against childless couples aimed to prohibit voluntary infecundity. The protection of motherhood and infancy by means of a welter of health and welfare reforms figured as the institutional focus of the "battle for the birthrate".<sup>9</sup>

With these pronouncements, Mussolini declared his commitment to defend the "morality and health of the Italian stirp".<sup>10</sup> A part of the authoritarian plan to alter Italian fertility involved the introduction beginning in 1928 of a series of laws favouring fathers of large families with tax breaks, housing benefits, and employment preference.<sup>11</sup> Mussolini's effort to make peace with the Catholic Church by presenting fascism as a force seeking to revive religious sentiment formed a vital component of his *politica della famiglia*. The Duce's firm stand on marriage, abortion, infanticide, prostitution, contraception, pornography, and child abandonment paid court to the values of a confessional nation.<sup>12</sup> When asked in an interview in 1932 whether the regime's *politica demografica* would actually succeed, Mussolini responded: "I strongly believe that the laws fascism has created to increase population will put a halt to demographic decadence". He continued: "more than the formal legislation, the moral precepts fascism embodies, and the religious virtues the regime upholds, will convince the Italian people to multiply".<sup>13</sup>

These financial and moral inducements, however, were a small facet of a monumental social experiment. The regime made a serious attempt to regulate reproduction by considerably enlarging the domain of state activity. The frantic bid to boost the birthrate served as the motive behind such disparate trends as government support for temperance, censure, emigration control, welfare and labour provision, public security laws, enactments on sanitation, prisons, asylums and hospitals, crime prevention, and reform of the penal and civil codes. These and other institutional and legislative developments marked the inauguration of public intervention in private life as a distinct form of fascist governance.

This thesis endeavours to explore the origins of fascist population policy in the eugenics movement. The study begins in the last decades of the nineteenth century when Italian anthropology first began to formulate theories about race. A new generation of scientists mixed evolutionary theory with the doctrine of atavism espoused by the father of criminology, Cesare Lombroso.<sup>14</sup> They defined evolution as a vertical progression from the lowest to the highest forms of life. The long-skulled race of dark-complexioned Mediterraneans, in their opinion, comprised a superior stirp gifted with a civilising mission to conquer and colonise inferior types. The theories behind scientific racism have seldom failed to discomfort historians.<sup>15</sup> But at this time in Italian history, the most respected and distinguished members of the academic establishment upheld a strong belief in racial hierarchy. Catholic theologians engaged in a lively debate on the descent of man from the apes.<sup>16</sup> Even the most vehement opponents of evolutionism could still find comfort in Italian eugenics' exaltation of the moral and spiritual perfection of the Italian race.<sup>17</sup> And the Catholic priest, Agostino Gemelli proposed a eugenic interpretation of the duty of all Italians to reproduce and multiply the race which was thoroughly compatible with Church dogma on birth control.<sup>18</sup>

The threat of racial degeneration loomed large in the scientific imagination as the challenge of a new century dawned. A backward agriculture and infant industry now appeared as principal themes in eugenic discussions about the country's prospects for continued progress. The fears which gripped the scientific community reflected a more general anxiety about the future of Italy in an era of increased hostility and competition for commercial and imperial supremacy. A belated nationhood finally achieved, the kingdom, nonetheless, seemed economically unfit to engage in power politics on equal terms with more advanced nations. At a time when Italian statesmen renewed their search for world stature and international prestige, eugenicists sought to develop strategies to prepare Italy for colonial expansion.

They came to see population increase as a solution to Italian political and industrial inferiority. Their pronatalist outlook unearthed an ideology about the evolutionary degeneration of Italian womanhood. Calls for the protection of motherhood reflected fears about women's alleged advancement in public life and increasing sexual freedom from childbirth. Eugenicists invoked the 'law of nature' in

their defense of the biological function of women as reproducers and the social primacy of their role as mothers. They depicted the preservation of a natural inequality between the sexes as a precondition for racial improvement. In an era when fertility began to decline, moral and medical arguments focused on the themes of a degradation of Italian femininity and a disease in the female reproductive apparatus. Scientific insight into sex difference sought to give evidence of the racial imperative of a restoration of reproduction to its proper place as the centre of women's identity, sexuality, and experience.

In the postwar period, these themes coalesced in the tenets of fascist population policy. Part two of this thesis examines the implementation of the regime's programme for racial betterment. As part of his pronatalist platform, Mussolini professed commitment to the cause of public provision for women and children. Promulgated on 10 December 1925, the founding statutes of the National Organisation for the Protection of Motherhood and Infancy gave credence to this claim. Guidelines for government support of gynaecological and obstetric clinics, subsidised free meals, infant day care centres, financial benefits for child support, hardship allowance for the needy, and a host of other schemes promised to improve the quality of the Italian stirp.

According to the regime's spokesmen, the advent of fascism marked the beginning of a welfare revolution in Italy.<sup>19</sup> No previous prime minister had delivered such a comprehensive package of public health reforms. Fascist commentators used the purported creation of a *stato assistenziale* for social leverage both at home and abroad.<sup>20</sup> Official press and propaganda reports highlighted how little liberalism had cared for the Italian people. The hesitant nature of liberal government, these arguments repeated, had kept the financial and institutional bases of relief private and charitable. Soon after his accession to the premiership, the Duce had done what over seventy years of liberal rule had failed to accomplish. The dictator had transformed the loose and untidy structure of *beneficenza* into a national system of social services.<sup>21</sup>

In his grand designs, Mussolini may have fulfilled the social mission of nineteenth-century statecraft. A health service based on universal right and free access replaced miserly and minimal

government under liberalism. ONMI stood to fortify the power and authority of the state by increasing the presence of fascism in daily life under the dictatorship. The regime attempted to overcome the structural weakness of the Italian state by centralising control of an administration of public welfare which stretched from Rome to every commune. But management of an unwieldy bureaucracy would prove no easy task.

The wider questions which inform this thesis concern the impact of fascism on Italian society. So central to Mussolini's modernising ambitions, welfare development lends insight into the actual achievements of the dictatorship. The study of the implementation of the regime's large and sweeping reforms reveals that the distinguishing features of fascist welfarism were begrudging state funding, confused directives, short-sighted planning, and mismanagement of resources. Whatever protection the state struggled to provide must be set against the reality of hardship and poverty for many working families under fascism. Even an efficient welfare system would find the delivery of material rewards substantial enough to influence the birthrate a difficult undertaking. But the fascist welfare state offered only lamentable incentives for Italian women to increase their fertility.

This thesis addresses the problem of change and continuity from liberalism to fascism. While most of the promises in ONMI's founding statutes remained unfulfilled throughout the fascist period, the organisation devoted a large share of its budget to a single campaign. Slow in attempting to meet other social targets, particularly those affecting married women workers, ONMI moved quickly to provide aid for single mothers. The third part of the thesis attempts to uncover the liberal precedents of fascist illegitimacy policy and to assess the long-term obstacles to welfare-state building in Italy. Liberalism failed in its desultory efforts to reform charitable institutions. But neither did fascism succeed in transforming a beneficent endowment of foundling homes and maternal hospices into a 'modern' system of state provision.

## Endnotes

- 1 B. Mussolini, *Opera omnia*, E. and D. Susmel, eds., XXII (Florence, 1957), pp. 360-90; B. Mussolini, *Opera omnia*, XXIII (Florence, 1958), p. 214.
- 2 D. V. Glass, "The Italian Struggle for Population", *Population Policies and Movements in Europe* (Reprint of the 1940 first edition, New York, 1967), p. 218. On the neo-malthusian movement in Italy, see R. De Longhis, "In difesa della donna e della razza", *Nuova dwf*, no. 21 (Winter/Spring, 1982), pp. 149-177.
- 3 B. Mussolini, *Opera omnia*, XII (Florence, 1953), pp. 321-327.
- 4 Glass, *Population Policies and Movements in Europe*, p.218; S. Lanaro, *Nazione e lavoro: Saggio sulla cultura borghese in Italia, 1870-1925* (Venice, 1979), pp. 56-57.
- 5 Mussolini, *Opera omnia*, XXII, pp. 367; 390.
- 6 *Opera omnia*, XXIII, pp. 209-16; Preface to R. Korherr, *Regresso delle nascite: Morte dei popoli* (Rome, 1928), pp. 7-15.
- 7 Preface, *Regresso delle nascite*, pp.10-15; *Opera omnia*, XXII, p. 210.
- 8 *Opera omnia*, XXII, p.365; *Regresso delle nascite*, p. 15.
- 9 *Opera omnia*, XXII, pp. 361-64.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p.36; Mussolini, *Opera omnia*, XXIII, pp. 215-216.
- 11 Glass, *Population Policies and Movements in Europe*, pp. 236-242; W. G. Welk, *Fascist Economic Policy: An Analysis of Italy's Economic Experiment* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1938), pp. 182-88; 242.
- 12 E. Menna, *Le provvidenze del regime fascista per la battaglia demografica in Italia* (Como, 1936), *passim*.
- 13 V. Consiglio, "La sterilità delle classi ricche", *Popolazione e fascismo*, L. Lojacano, ed. (Turin, 1933), p.85; *Regresso delle nascite*, p.15.
- 14 J. A. Davis, *Conflict and Control: Law and Order in Nineteenth-Century Italy* (London, 1988), pp. 326-39; 358-59.
- 15 See L. Preti, "Fascist Imperialism and Racism", *The Axe Within: Italian Fascism in Action* (New York, 1974), pp. 187-207, which argues that fascist racism was imported from abroad. See also, G. Pancaldi, *Darwin in Italia: Impresa scientifica e frontieri culturali* (Bologna, 1983), p. 268; and his *Charles Darwin: "storia" ed "economia" della natura* (Florence, 1977), pp. 186-87.
- 16 The journal, *Civiltà Cattolica* ran a continuing series on

- evolutionary theory; see "La scienza e l'uomo bestia" in Vol. I, pp. 143-45; Vol. II, pp. 34-44; Vol. III, pp. 40-56, of the 11th series (Florence, 1880). And see, G. Landucci, *Darwinismo a Firenze: Tra scienza e ideologia, 1860-1900* (Florence, 1977), pp. 79-86.
- 17 P. Corsi and P. J. Weindling, "Darwinism in Germany, France and Italy", *The Darwinian Heritage*, D. Kohn, ed., (Princeton, 1985), pp. 683-731. P. Guillaume, "The Principle of Population and the Teaching of the Roman Catholic Church during the Twentieth Century", in *Malthus Past and Present*, J. Dupâquier, A. Fauve-Chamoux, and E. Grebenik, eds. (London, 1983), pp. 171-79.
- 18 See below, p. 34.
- 19 A. Lo Monaco-Aprile, *La protezione della maternità e dell'infanzia* (Rome, 1934), pp. 5-34; and his *La politica assistenziale dell'Italia fascista* (Rome, 1931), p. 312. See also, A. Marracino, "Il problema demografico e gli errori di Malthus", *Giornale d'Italia*, 21 November 1928; and G. Marciano, "Eugenica e politica demografica del regime", *Popolo d'Italia*, 31 March 1933; 2 and 4 April 1933.
- 20 ONMI, *L'Opera nazionale per la protezione della maternità e dell'infanzia dalla sua fondazione* (Rome, 1962), pp. 113-17.
- 21 A. Lo Monaco-Aprile, "Lo spirito e il contenuto della legge fascista sulla protezione della maternità e della infanzia", *MI*, III (February, 1929), p. 158; C. Micheli, *L'attività dell'ONMI nel campo della protezione della maternità, 1926-1930* (Milan, 1931), pp. 2-4, in which he states that the regime wants ONMI to function "su grandi masse".

PART I.  
EUGENICS

Nessuno, oggi, prende sul serio la famigerata sedicente legge di Malthus....Falsa e imbecile è la tesi che la minore popolazione significhi maggiore benessere.

Benito Mussolini  
1928

## The Italian Race

The Italian eugenics movement emerged in the aftermath of national unification when industrialisation first began to transform society and the economy. The anxieties shared by a new generation of intellectuals grew out of this experience of rapid and unprecedented change. To many contemporary observers Italy still lagged far behind the world's advanced economies and showed no real promise of future greatness. The failures of colonial policy also gave impetus to new worries about national identity and destiny. Doubts about the nation's prospects for survival in an age of imperialism assailed Italian scientists at the turn of the century. In their search for some reason to have faith in progress, they came to uphold a belief in biological race.

This section of the thesis attempts to extend the study of the origins of fascist ideology beyond its narrow recognition of intellectual sources to a broad understanding of cultural influences.<sup>1</sup> Darwinist debate did not die out in Italy by the 1870s, as some scholars have contended.<sup>2</sup> Nor was the discovery of biological race in the last decades of the nineteenth century an expression of conventional nationalist sentiment, as others have maintained.<sup>3</sup> Proponents of racial progress renounced the inherited patriotic ideals of the unification period as empty rhetoric from a bygone era. They created new political myths in their desire to see a strong Italy embark on the twentieth century. Eugenicists transformed Italian nationalism by giving the struggle for empire a lofty purpose and a scientific justification in evolutionary theory.

### *International Eugenics*

In July 1912, Leonard Darwin and the English Eugenics Education Society presided over the first international eugenics conference. Hundreds of delegates from around the world attended the meeting. The Rt. Hon. Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, and the American academic and former president of Harvard University, Charles William Elliot both gave inaugural addresses. Alfred Ploetz, president of the International Society for Race Hygiene, and Sir William Osler, Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford University, joined the list of distinguished speakers. The purpose of the week-long gathering was to publicise the aims of the science and to



encourage countries to form affiliations. The question of whether social intervention, called "artificial selection" by eugenicists, could actually effect desirable racial change dominated discussion.<sup>4</sup>

The conference confirmed the pre-eminence of English and American scientists as leaders in the field. But the large Italian delegation showed a desire to gain recognition from their foreign colleagues. Some Italian eugenicists became members of the permanent standing committee of the international movement and others helped to organise the assembly's symposia. Professor Alfredo Niceforo, a statistician at the University of Naples, served on the conference's central planning committee, along with Professor Guiseppe Sergi, a founding member of the Roman Anthropological Society. A renowned anthropologist, Sergi enjoyed a wide reputation through English translations of some of his major scholarly works.<sup>5</sup>

Other Italian academics chaired seminars devoted to the study of particular eugenic problems. Only 28 years old in 1912, Corrado Gini held a professorship in statistics at the University of Cagliari. In his conference paper, Gini expressed his belief that nascent social sciences, like demography, could contribute as much as the natural sciences had done to understanding the mechanisms of racial evolution. Other Italian delegates included Sante de Sanctis, the president of the Roman Anthropological Society and an eminent psychiatrist by profession.<sup>6</sup>

Professor of neuro-pathology at the University of Genoa, Enrico Morselli gave a paper on the importance of preserving and enhancing racial variation and hierarchy. In their attempt to create perfect human beings, he stated, eugenicists should not strive to abolish the natural inequality between races and nations.<sup>7</sup> Roberto Michels, presented ideas drawn from his major work, *The Sociology of Political Parties*, which had just been published. He attempted to describe how democracy was "unnatural" given the "iron law of oligarchy" which gave some men an inborn ability to rule.<sup>8</sup>

Professor of political economy at the University of Turin, Achille Loria addressed some of the issues raised by Francis Galton, the English mathematician who established eugenics as a science in 1883.<sup>9</sup> Loria criticised the middle-class élitism of Galton's belief that only the "elect" produced a superior progeny. Loria proposed that the average proletariat possessed a far better inheritance than

the privileged and pampered men of "genius" Galton so admired.<sup>10</sup>

The Italian eugenics movement comprised prominent intellectuals from various disciplines who shared a belief in eugenics as a science and a commitment to the cause of racial advancement. Eugenicists thought they could discover the laws governing heredity and turn the course of evolution in a desirable direction. They proclaimed themselves the guardians of posterity, men of science with a moral duty to apply their knowledge for the purpose of human betterment.

The arrogance of this vision found expression in their trust that a scientific revolution approached. Enrico Morselli pronounced eugenics a "new force of rebirth and salvation" promising to bring Italy out of the dark age of uncertainty which had befallen in the aftermath of unification.<sup>11</sup> An astute observer of these events, Agostino Gemelli recorded his impression that lombrosian ideas of incurable social ills had waned in Italy.<sup>12</sup> In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Italian science left the laboratory and now sought ways to change society.

#### **'Euthanasia' and 'Defectives'**

The 1912 convention raised important questions for Italian scientists. They recognised the implications of eugenics' aim of social control, and struggled to define their own position on the individual's right to reproduce without interference from the state. The inquiry grew out of the 'defectives' debate and the related 'euthanasia' question which radical eugenicists had urged their colleagues to address at the international congress. While Italian eugenics shared many of the assumptions of mendelism which dominated discussions of heredity, they expressed an ambivalent attitude towards the call for repressive legislation.<sup>13</sup>

A review of the convention appeared in the *Corriere della Sera* on 4 September 1912. Alessandro Clerici reported that Italian eugenicists accepted the premise that defectives transmitted inferior traits to their offspring. But he also noted that scientists in Italy, unlike many of their colleagues abroad, rejected forms of racial hygiene such as sterilisation.<sup>14</sup> Enrico Morselli addressed these issues in an article which attempted to give Italian eugenics a social agenda. Italian scientists adhered to a belief in a natural variation among races. Purity of race stood out among the goals of the science, as "blending with bad breeds" damaged the peculiar

personality and physique of the more perfect latin type. Although he accepted the scientific justification for the reproductive regulation of defectives, he remained reluctant to expose Italian eugenics to the risk of ridicule by publicising a radical programme.<sup>15</sup>

In a book entitled *Mercy-Killing: Euthanasia*, Morselli explored arguments both for and against the containment of social contaminants. His definition of poor inheritance was rather vague. Defectives comprised "all those anti-social elements who endanger the racial constitution." He admitted "humanitarians may have a certain repugnance for repressive laws on human reproduction" but affirmed society's "absolute right to protect itself from the harm caused by the undesirable and unfit." He discussed the relative merits of the various proposals for racial hygiene put forth at the 1912 convention. These included exile or deportation, confinement, sterilisation, marital prohibition and mass murder. Positive measures for social selection comprised the creation of a female reproductive caste, sex education in schools, health campaigns, and legalised polygamy for men.<sup>16</sup>

Morselli also confronted the controversy about 'racial euthanasia' which had arisen at the 1912 conference. He argued that if eugenicists stood firmly behind the belief in the supremacy of white races, they should also advocate the extermination of inferior races. The conquest of new lands by Europeans inevitably led to the question of what should be done with indigeneous populations. He saw the colonisation of New Zealand and Australia as two extreme examples of conscious policies of racial decimation. Morselli did distinguish Italian eugenics from foreign movements. The only practical way to conserve the white race, he argued, was to prohibit mixing with inferior black, yellow, and coloured peoples. Italy, he stressed, was a Catholic nation with customs and traditions different from those of Anglo-Saxon countries. While the Church would surely oppose any artificial interference in reproduction, he wrote, the Italian people would mount a strong opposition to radical policies. The Italian route to racial perfection, he continued, would be more bland and timid than that followed by foreigners.<sup>17</sup>

Recognition of the social primacy of the Catholic Church compelled Italian scientists to reject extreme views. Practical concerns also influenced their outlook. In an article appearing in an anthropo-

logical journal in 1914, Guiseppe Sergi addressed the question of how Italians could best arrive at racial perfection. Although he did not voice any ethical objection to "negative" measures, he raised doubts about the scientific evidence for belief in the possibility of perfecting the physical components of racial stock. No definitive proof yet existed, he maintained, about whether sterilisation would actually improve racial patrimony. And, the costs of implementing any largescale experiment far exceeded the capacity of the Italian state. Sergi worried about the moral consequences of permitting only "selective marriages", an idea first advanced by Francis Galton in 1865. Denial of sexual rights to the unfit, he believed, would increase illegitimacy and lead to even greater burdens on society to care for outcast offspring.<sup>19</sup>

Guiseppe Sergi and Alfredo Niceforo convened a general meeting of the Roman Anthropological Society on the 21 March 1913 to discuss the role of eugenics in society. Sergi represented a moderate position by arguing that eugenicists should pursue biological research on speciation and avoid imprudent forays into social experimentation.<sup>19</sup> Speakers expressed different views about whether science could improve the race, but members did approve a resolution calling for a wide dissemination of eugenic ideas. Eager enthusiasts saw the opportunity to carve out for themselves a prominent role in public affairs outside the university. Niceforo believed government should use scientific knowledge to plan social policy. The adoption of eugenic aims in forward-looking legislation would enhance the power of the state to create worthwhile citizens. Others agreed that eugenics should aim to convince the Italian people of the need for "political intervention" in private life to promote racial improvement.<sup>20</sup>

A gradual "education" and "persuasion" of the public became the strategy of Italian science. Eugenicists saw their movement as a forum for scholarly debate and as a progressive lobby in Italian society. In December 1913, members of the Roman Anthropological Society announced the creation of the Italian Committee for the Study of Eugenics, and elected Guiseppe Sergi as their president. Sante de Sanctis assumed the vice-presidency of the committee, and Gini and Niceforo joined others as appointed officials of the central directorate.<sup>21</sup> By April 1914, the newly-formed society counted fifty-

eight adherents.<sup>22</sup>

Eugenic movements outside of Italy focused on the question of racial defilement and aimed to promote laws to 'cleanse' the race of 'poisons'.<sup>23</sup> Italian eugenicists saw 'race hygiene' in the form of fertility control as a 'Protestant' and 'Anglo-Saxon' invention. They did not approve of 'asexualisation' as a desirable measure. On the contrary, they came to depict Italian racial superiority in terms of innate sexual prowess.

Eugenic ideas gained currency in a wide range of Italian intellectual and political circles. Carlo Francesco Ferraris argued that any nation which did not criminalise contraception and abortion was destined to become a weak and degenerate "eunuch" race. A former socialist, Napoleone Colajanni wrote *Latins and Anglo-Saxons: Inferior and Superior Races* in 1906, a work which fused marxist and eugenic theory. Because of the obstacle of belated nationhood and industrialisation, he asserted, the latin race could compete with great powers only by accelerating the pace of economic change.<sup>24</sup> The prominent liberal politician, Francesco Nitti declared "latin fecundity" an unrelenting civilising force which would inspire the rebirth of a second Roman empire.<sup>25</sup> The revolutionary syndicalist, Paolo Orano called condoms a tool of international capital and a "bourgeois conspiracy" to keep the proletariat numerically impotent. National survival, according to him, depended on whether future generations would increase population and create colonies.<sup>26</sup> The founder of the Italian Nationalist Association, Enrico Corradini borrowed biological metaphors to enhance his thesis of the "proletarian nation". A young and virile nation, Italy was destined to outlive bourgeois, decadent Europe and grow to be a new world leader.<sup>27</sup> The following sections attempt to explore how eugenic ideas came to dominate prewar Italian culture.

### ***National Degeneration***

Italian eugenics grew out of a crisis of confidence in liberalism. The impoverishment of liberal politics encouraged a scientific debate on the future of the Italian nation. Pessimism amongst intellectuals also derived from recognition of the legacy of belated nationhood in a world increasingly dominated by great powers. The nation's second-rate status as the 'invalid' of Europe became the focus of early eugenic writings.

In an article published in 1899, Guiseppe Sergi discussed the problem of national degeneration.<sup>28</sup> The work is important because its theme points to new directions in scientific thinking. A former student of Lombroso, Sergi used the concept of degeneration to launch his criticisms of Italian politics and society.<sup>29</sup> Rather than depict degeneration as an individual's affliction, as Lombroso had done, Sergi developed the idea into a theory of flawed national character. His panoramic view of national history as a progression of stages from infancy to senescence reflected the impact of evolutionary theory. Biological and medical metaphors served to illuminate his concept of the organic nation. This vision of society as a biological organism subject to the laws of nature would have an enduring impact on eugenics.

Sergi defined Italy as a "morbid" nation suffering the "crippling malady of obsession with its Roman past as a great empire". A pathetic reflection of its former self, Italy had become a "dead civilisation" paralysed by the chronic "illness of frustrated political prepotence". Unless new forces of change and progress revitalised the Italian people, he warned, the nation threatened to become extinct altogether. Sergi called for a "regeneration" to awaken those national ambitions which colonial failures abroad and political instability at home had destroyed.<sup>30</sup>

Published in 1900, Sergi's *The Decadence of Latin Nations* further developed the theme of degeneration. The evolutionary perspective became more pronounced in this work, as Sergi described history as a struggle between nations and the world as a natural hierarchy of powers. He depicted Italy as a "sick" nation disabled by an innate inferiority complex. He blamed the governing classes for having caused the "precocious decadence" which hindered his "infantile" nation from regaining empire.<sup>31</sup>

Sergi argued that in the 1880s Italy had experienced its first growing pains in "ridiculous" expeditions in Assab and Massowa, both premature attempts to assert "national adulthood". The traumatic "disillusionments" suffered should have awakened Italy to the harsh reality of its "natural inferiority amongst mature nations". The military victory of Japan over China in 1894 and 1895 unsettled any complacency about lasting European supremacy in global affairs. The staggering defeat of the Italian army at Adawa in March 1895 by

Ethiopian chieftains, Sergi stated, caused the collapse of Crispi's ineffectual government and put a humiliating end to Italy's ambitions in East Africa.<sup>32</sup> These symptoms of the decadence of the "latin race" confirmed Italy's "impotence" in armed and economic combat against superior powers. "Shamed and puny", Italy had consistently blundered in colonial adventures, Sergi lamented, and repeated failures had prematurely stunted his nation's imperial growth. Crispi had "pathetically sought to snatch the bare bones discarded by the French, the Germans, and, above all, the British".<sup>33</sup>

Sergi found the cause of national decline in Italy's political leadership. Periodic parliamentary crises exposed the "latent paralysis" of the entire edifice of governance. The constitutional question, compromised premiership, and the consistent failure to devise authoritative solutions to social and economic problems seemed signs of the "inherent political invalidism and cretinism" of the nation's leaders. The congenital weaknesses of Italian nationhood had become increasingly evident in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Expensive and unprofitable colonial expeditions showed up the deficiencies of Italy as a commercial and military power.<sup>34</sup>

Despite these obstacles, Sergi envisaged a future when a new Italy would achieve the military and economic maturity requisite for competition on equal terms. According to him, the Italian people possessed one great asset which lay dormant in the corrupted national character, a natural survival instinct. He believed a new generation of political leaders should harness this energy to forge a truly unified and powerful nation. To prepare for empire, Sergi believed, the nation had to undergo first a social struggle for rebirth. He saw the necessity for a "great civilising mission" within Italy's own frontiers to make the masses fit enough to meet the challenge of a new age. Only through "social expansionism" at home could Italy's ambitions abroad be realised.<sup>35</sup>

The idea of national degeneration reflected the belief that evolution could be regressive as well as progressive. This fear exposed the underlying insecurities of a generation who became painfully aware of the frailties of the Italian nation-state. Despite the gloomy nature of Sergi's reflections on the achievements of the nineteenth century, a new nationalism surfaced, which appealed to Italians to overcome their inferiority.

### ***Scientific Imperialism***

In a book entitled *Italy: The Origins*, which was first published in 1895, Guiseppe Sergi introduced race into the discussion of his nation's imperial destiny. He defined race as the biological, moral, and psychological attributes of the Italian people. According to him, race constituted the most important motive force in evolutionary change. He portrayed the world as a natural order regulated by the struggle for survival between superior species and their inferior prey. Sergi defined the peculiar racial personality of the Italian people as an outgrowth of their psychic urge to create empire. He looked to this instinctual drive as the answer to the question of national survival in a hostile world.<sup>36</sup> The idea of Italy's entitlement to the 'lost territories' of the Roman empire had long been used to defend colonialist and irredentist aims.<sup>37</sup> But the Sicilian anthropologist gave a new scientific justification for the old *mare nostrum* frustration over the closure of the Mediterranean to Italian expansion.

Sergi argued that the Mediterranean was the birthplace of civilisation and the Italian people the first civilised race. He believed he could trace the origins of the race to a time over 30 thousand years before when the Italian stirp had first appeared as indigeneous inhabitants of the peninsula. Descendents of these early progenitors of pure latin stock founded the Roman civilisation in the Iron Age. Bronze Age invasion by marauding aryaans from the East, he explained, had penetrated only a small fraction of the northern Italian mainland, leaving most latins an unadulterated breed. And in the course of natural evolution, those lesser attributes of indoeuropean migrants had become subsumed by the more perfect and dominant characteristics of the Italic type. Italians possessed unique racial assets which allowed them to achieve more and live longer than other great Mediterranean civilisations. The evolution of the Minoan and later Greek races remained arrested, so neither civilisation developed into great empires. In contrast, the latin race was driven by an "innate tendency towards imperialism", an instinctual drive which continually renewed the blood and force of the Roman people. This immutable trait compelled Italians to be a warrior and predatory race.<sup>38</sup>

In this long and scholarly treatise on racial formation, Sergi



aimed to show how imperialism, militarism, and capitalism, which together comprised "civilisation" in his opinion, were irresistible expressions of Italian racial temperament and destiny. To survive as a race, Italians, he urged, must become a civilising people once more. Because commerce and colonies fostered the development of industry and culture, latins must now seek to break beyond their cramped frontiers and reconquer empire.<sup>39</sup>

The view of imperialism as a psychological necessity gained ground during the Giolittian period when Italy launched a campaign to recapture the 'granary of ancient Rome'. Contemporary observers watched the upsurge of popular nationalism surrounding the 1911 Tripoli venture with fascination. According to Roberto Michels, the outburst of euphoria over the African affair reflected a deep need of the Italian people to bury their image as the "Cinderella of Europe" in the past. Frustrated ambitions had nurtured an aggressive and defensive drive in the Italian public for international influence and prestige. Although the economic rewards from future commercial and agricultural exploitation of Libya would be scant, he believed, the fervour over the conquest had renewed a healthy national identity. For the first time since the "holy wars of national liberation", the Italian people felt pride in their nation's achievements.<sup>40</sup>

The inborn qualities scientists saw in the Italian race reflected their own hopes for the future. The conquest of Libya promised to regenerate the race's supreme qualities and instincts. But the age of empire stirred new fears in the scientific imagination as the threat of racial immingling now loomed large in discussions of 'primitive' types.

#### ***The Destiny of Inferior Races***

In a series of lectures he delivered at the University of Turin, which were published in 1911, Enrico Morselli set out to predict the evolutionary future of races and their sub-species. He wished to demonstrate how inferior types would perish in the course of natural selection because of arrested moral and physical development. Evolution, he believed, did hold out the promise of human perfection for the white race, as continual adaptations would bring improvements to an already highly-evolved form of life.<sup>41</sup>

An early convert to evolutionism, Morselli owed an intellectual debt to the doctrine of atavism. He based his theory of a disparate

but determinate evolution of races on a belief in outward appearance as a sign of hereditary endowment. Morselli described the white race as an "elect species" because their physical attributes conformed to his own standards of beauty. He praised the idealised forms of classical "Roman" sculpture and saw these as embodiments of the excellence at which white human beings would arrive. He envisaged a "future utopia" in which the world was inhabited solely by perfect human beings.<sup>42</sup>

The underside of this aesthetic image of human perfectibility was the representation of other races as ugly and sub-human. Their brain development mysteriously retarded, primitive races were "protomorphs" who had not yet acquired full human traits. Their bodies showed anatomical traces of moral and physical inferiority and even a morbid predisposition to degeneration. Their eventual extinction, Morselli believed, would be no great loss to humanity as these bestial and ancestral types had contributed nothing to the dual advance of evolution and civilisation.<sup>43</sup>

Morselli categorised people who belonged to distinct ethnic, national, and linguistic groups as sub-species within the three main races. Within the white race, the latin stirp stood out as an original and pure somatype. He admitted that science had yet to discover the mechanisms governing transmission of racial attributes. He relied on what he and other eugenicists called "germ-plasm" to describe something latent in the evolutionary process which conserved the latin stirp. Morselli did not express any doubt about the characteristics which distinguished latins from Anglo-Saxons, another main group of European descent. Like Sergi, he celebrated the Mediterranean as a model of physical grace, moral strength, and intellectual prowess.<sup>44</sup>

But the Anglo-Saxons showed signs of cultural decline. Differences in build and colour made them effete and infirm, while climate and geography weakened their characters. They possessed an unhealthy reverence for democracy and literature, grim reminders of their nervous natures. They were a people who revelled in religious heresy, worldly pleasures, and hedonistic pursuits. And they indulged a propensity towards homosexuality and libertinage, a sexual taint which boded ill for their future reproductive fitness. While members of the superior race did deviate from his ideal, Morselli believed

evolution held some hope for improvement of these defective mutations.<sup>46</sup> But the degeneracy of lower races appeared irreversible to the scientist.

Knowledge of the laws of evolution, Morselli explained, led him to uphold a pessimistic prognosis of the survival chances of the savages. He gave specific examples of sub-human species who were destined to die out. These included the Australian Aborigines, a hopelessly deformed and diseased variety in his estimation. Descendants of early man who failed to evolve, the Aborigines possessed marks of their primitive and stunted inheritance. That they were pious, short, and dark people served as proof enough for Morselli of their ineludible elimination in the battle for human perfection. And the brown-skinned Moaris of remote New Zealand, he claimed, showed the personality traits of an uncivilisable people. The arrival of missionaries, Morselli argued, had failed to elevate them from their semi-animal barbarism, for the Moaris violently resisted Christianity and other aspects of Western culture.<sup>46</sup>

Although their bodies had adapted remarkably well to harsh environments, the intelligence and morality of black Africans remained backward. Their atavism condemned black people to extinction, Morselli stated, and made them a degenerate and dangerous race. Contact with Europeans, he stressed, had brought out those injurious and latent tendencies, like alcoholism, vice, and crime which whites controlled in themselves because of their civilised natures. Blacks would perish in the struggle for racial hegemony because their primitive instinct gave them no strength of will to resist temptation. They remained unregenerate even under the salutary influence of civilised societies. The experience of Afro-Americans in the United States confirmed Morselli's belief in an innate disorder common to all inferior races which condemned them to decay. Black Americans, he asserted, showed no indication that they would ever rise above being the poorest, the unhealthiest, the most promiscuous, and the least ambitious minority group in the nation.<sup>47</sup>

Giuseppe Sergi echoed many of the opinions expressed by Enrico Morselli. According to him, savages ranked lower on the evolutionary scale than the lowliest criminal degenerate found in white civilised society. Completely amoral and uneducable, they weakened their racial germ-plasm in frenzied and ritualised sex which exposed them to the

risk of venereal disease.<sup>48</sup> The idea of the degeneracy of other races could be used to justify European colonial domination. The worth to humanity of inferior beings who were destined to die out anyway seemed rather negligible to Sergi when set against the higher civilising mission of the superior stirps.

#### ***Eugenics and Anti-Semitism***

Eugenic works also focused on the importance of the 'Jewish question' to the future of Europe. A general in the Italian armed forces, Livio Livi wrote a statistical study of the purity of the Jewish race which was published in 1918. He asked whether all Jews shared the same ethnic and anthropometric traits despite dispersal in different countries. Although they had little in common in terms of complexion, stature, proportions, and brain size, he argued, the varieties of Jewish types were unimportant when common ancestry and culture were considered. And those differences could not compare to the huge divide separating Christians from Jews.<sup>49</sup>

Livi believed that the Jewish race would remain homogeneous despite superficial assimilation into European nationalities. Enrico Morselli expressed a more rancorous point of view. In his preface to a translated work by the French eugenicist, Arturo Ruppin, entitled *The Jews of Today*, Morselli argued that white Europeans had to defend themselves from Jewish influence. He claimed that "Abraham's stirp" had risen from the ghettos of mediaeval Europe and infiltrated the highest echelons of Italian society. Because of their sly natures, Jews outwardly assimilated, he maintained, yet remained true to their separatist and exclusive traditions. Though a mixed and morbid race, the "semitic type" possessed facial and cranial characteristics different from the fair-skinned, tall, and elegant hellenic and latin stirps. The murder of Christ their greatest contribution to the development of Western civilisation, Jews represented to him a force within Europe which was "invading, prosletising, and messianic".<sup>50</sup>

Morselli defended zionist aspirations, but only because he hoped that a future homeland would finally rid Europe of the Jewish menace. He also expressed the wish that the Jews remaining in Europe would simply perish through racial degeneration. The diaspora had already weakened "hebrew stock", he argued; and declining birthrates within Jewish communities everywhere in Europe were the most visible

symptom of imminent extinction. Through intermarriage with superior European blood, the Jews would cease to exist as the "elect people".<sup>51</sup>

Most Italian eugenicists did not perceive their views as inflammatory. Some were even careful to point out a difference between the scientific observation of truth and the expression of political opinion.<sup>52</sup> They believed their theories of racial degeneration to be free of any subjective bias. Yet, the attempt of Italian scientists to prove that 'inferior' races were destined to perish reveals intriguing ambivalences. Their view of nature as a struggle for racial superiority and dominance rests on a deep antipathy and antagonism for the 'other'. They constructed a positive identity for themselves as Italians, but their image was very aggressive. And they represented non-latins as types embruted by an inferior racial inheritance. Yet they remained reluctant to condone any 'artificial' interference to accelerate the regressive evolution of degenerate races. The Italian scientific imagination chose instead to wish these races away by assigning them a brief and uninspiring part in the evolutionary history of humanity.

#### ***Racial Fertility and Blending***

Another anxiety began to dominate eugenics as scientists confronted the issue of European patterns of fertility. Declining birthrates everywhere in Europe, but especially those evidenced in France, stimulated discussion about whether the white race was fit enough to build and maintain empires.

In April 1911, Corrado Gini gave a lecture in Trieste which became the basis for his book, *Demographic Factors in the Evolution of Nations*, which was published the following year. This work began with the question of why such a noble and gifted race as the Italian should face extinction when inferior races were reproducing with vigour. Italians suffered an exhaustion of reproductive power characteristic of a great but aged race. Young and virile races like the Slavs and Asians, he argued, showed a healthier survival instinct. Their growing populations provided manpower for huge armies capable of conquering new territories.<sup>53</sup>

Corrado Gini attributed a biological cause to the decrease in Italian fertility. According to his theory of demographic degeneration, innate fecundity progressively deteriorated as the

racial constitution aged. Evolution brought physiological changes to the racial metabolism which exhausted reproductive energy and resulted in low fertility and inferior progeny. The quantity and quality of offspring produced varied from one generation to the next because of the reduced bodily strength and stamina of the race. A race passed through four evolutionary stages from youth, maturity, senescence, to decline, each characterised by a successive diminishment of racial sex vigour. In his view, individuals and families, as well as races and nations, followed this predestined cycle of birth and decay.<sup>54</sup>

The theory of an organic predisposition towards sexual impotence revealed inconsistencies of argument. Gini variously referred to the demographic crisis confronting the white race as latent or acute. He contradicted himself too about whether the Italian population was growing or dying. And he did not address the question of why humanity had not perished long ago if, according to his own depiction, generative powers irreversibly deteriorated. Despite the weaknesses of a prose style ridden with dichotomies, Gini's broader vision of a biological time-clock threatening the Italian race with extinction proved a powerful myth. His reputation made both in Italy and abroad, Gini could consider himself after 1912 the most celebrated eugenicist of his generation.

But Gini also harboured a darker scientific interest in the question of racial contamination through interbreeding. Because he saw fertility as a symptom of racial health, he grew uneasy about the higher reproductive output of inferior races. Many of the primitive races he so deplored, like the Mexicans of Central America and the Bantu of South and Central Africa seemed much more fit in reproductive terms than his own sadly senile race.<sup>55</sup> And these were bastard races who, in his view, were far less sound than pure breeds like the Italian. He rejected outright the notion that intermixture could produce hybrid strains who were more resistant to environmental and biological pressures and possibly even more prolific. And he did not consider the idea that the influx of new blood from a younger race could regenerate an old one.<sup>56</sup> In his *Demographic Factors in the Evolution of Nations*, he began to develop an argument against racial blending. He expressed a strong belief that the European race was the best the human species had yet produced and

must be protected from blood pollution by races of little worth.

Not until the postwar period, however, did Gini begin a personal crusade within the international eugenics movement for the defense of white Europe from foreign blood contagion. In August 1919, Gini wrote to Leonard Darwin requesting that he put forth a resolution before the English Eugenics Education Society calling for scientific investigation into the pernicious effects of race mixture between blacks and whites. Gini also maintained that it was now an opportune moment for all member societies to begin lobbying their governments for legislation to prohibit interracial marriages and sexual congress. The global conflict, he believed, had put the question of contact between Europeans and inferior African and mixed races at the forefront of eugenic debate.<sup>57</sup>

Though Darwin brought the motion before the board of the English society on several occasions, the proposal to put pressure on government to promulgate restrictive race laws met with a cool reception. Immigration controls to limit the rights of colonial populations to reside in the United Kingdom were welcome, but encroachments on the private freedoms of Englishmen abroad were quite unthinkable. In a letter to Gini which he wrote on 7 May 1920, Darwin responded by saying that the English society found the suggestion of mounting such a campaign "impolitic". In any event, he continued, such an extreme measure would have little chance of success given existing democratic conditions in the country. The president of the English society felt eugenicists should undertake a "gradual" approach by cultivating public awareness of questions of racial survival.<sup>58</sup>

Official government investigations into the size of the Jewish and immigrant population on native soil confirmed that Italy remained far more ethnically homogeneous than the great colonial powers, England and France.<sup>59</sup> Decades of heavy emigration abroad might have stirred worries about racial dilution, but this was not an issue for Corrado Gini. Rather, the assumption behind his fear of race poison was that Italy would indeed become a large empire and as such would have to develop an imperial policy towards indigeneous populations.

Rebuffed by Leonard Darwin, Gini used other institutional affiliations to launch his attack on racial poisons. Formally

established in Paris in July 1928, the International Union for the Scientific Investigation of Population Problems grew out of the efforts of British organisers of the World Population Congress held in Geneva in September 1927. Gini was elected to the central directorship of the Union in 1927, which comprised an initial membership of 27 nations.<sup>60</sup> He presided over the International Congress for Studies on Population, held in Rome in September 1931 under the auspices of the Italian Committee for the Study of Population Problems. The committee leadership included prominent eugenicists like the Catholic priest, Agostino Gemelli and the endocrinologist, Nicola Pende. Along with Mussolini, Luigi Federzoni, President of the Senate, Alfredo Rocco, Minister of Justice, and Guisepppe Bottai, Minister of Corporations, were in attendance as honorary delegates.<sup>61</sup>

Corrado Gini used the opportunity of an inaugural speech to address the question of primitive races. Especially proud of the research of his committee on the fecundity of Italians, Gini reported that he would conduct expeditions abroad to study the reproductive habits of inferior populations. He wished to provide statistical evidence of the lethal side effects of crossbreeding for superior races. He believed that intermixture weakened the racial germ-plasm and resulted in less reproductive hybrids.<sup>62</sup> At the Second International Congress of Eugenics, held in New York in 1932, Gini gave a paper on the evolutionary unification of the diverse Italian anthropological types into a pure and superior race. Preservation of the special attributes of Italians, he believed, depended on whether government would prohibit pollution from bad blood.<sup>63</sup>

Corrado Gini received generous funding for his projects from the International Union for the Scientific Investigation of Population Problems. But the general secretariat under Sir William Beveridge at the London School of Economics and Captain George H. L. F. Pitt-Rivers in Paris grew increasingly suspicious about Gini's political motivation and scientific method. The Union declared that research into racial sterility and fertility could not be undertaken without consideration of the effects of food supply and nutrition on the body. At a plenary assembly in October 1932, the executive committee decided to oust the Italian delegation from the Union.<sup>64</sup>

Despite this setback, Corrado Gini did not dismantle his



committee or halt research. He now sent expeditions abroad through the Royal Italian Geographic Society and gained Italian government backing for an Imperial Commission on the Demography of Primitive Races. In 1933, Gini published the results of medical research conducted on over one thousand native families in the Libyan colony. Other major projects in the following years included a study of why the Berbers of North Africa possessed European racial features like blond hair and blue eyes. Though noble in build and less uncivilised than black Africans, the hamitic race, his published results confirmed, had not mixed with European blood.<sup>65</sup>

### ***Eugenics and Fascism***

By the end of the nineteenth century, the idea of the 'nation' no longer inspired allegiance amongst those who beheld a unified Italy which failed to live up to their ideals. Italian intellectuals discarded the inherited culture of the *risorgimento*, and searched for new maxims and exhortations. The inborn and eternal qualities they assigned to the 'race' reflected their own conception of what Italy could become in the future. Eugenicists welcomed the advent of fascism and found a government amenable to their cause. The regime lavished public appointments on some scientists, like Corrado Gini, and prestigious new professorships in the eugenic sciences and state funding for research projects on others. Eugenicists proudly took their place as the experts and planners of a fascist Italy. Through national press coverage, catchwords like 'race' and 'degeneration' passed into common currency. By the end of the 1920s, the language of fascist politics became virtually indistinguishable from that of eugenics.

Old debates did not fade away in the postwar period. The issue of sterilisation re-emerged at a eugenics convention in Milan in September 1924 when Corrado Gini gave an address which distanced Italian eugenics from an hereditarian position. Race hygienists, he stated, made inflated claims based on zoological and botanical research, while human beings were different from lower species. Italian eugenics, he asserted, wholly rejected the aim of either voluntary or compulsory sterilisation. Instead, the movement in Italy firmly supported the efforts of the fascist government to achieve "gradual improvements in the quality of the race" by means of "modifications in the social environment".<sup>66</sup> At a conference on

mental hygiene in Rome in 1929, German psychiatrists caused a furore by defending sterilisation on scientific and moral grounds, an event which the national press reported.<sup>67</sup>

A papal encyclical on 31 December 1930 condemned the Anglican Church's condonation of birth control at the recent Lambeth Conference. A subsequent decree issued by the office of the Holy See on 21 March 1931 denounced eugenics as a false science, and criticised the fascist regime's population policy. Pope Pius XII drew a clear distinction between propagation as a Christian precept and propagation as a political duty.<sup>68</sup>

Together with other prominent eugenicists, Father Agostino Gemelli, a founder and rector of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, and an experimental psychologist, addressed these issues at a convention of Catholic physicians in April 1931. Gemelli stressed in his speech that the Church opposed measures to impede fecundation. Italian science, he affirmed, also respected the sacred right of all individuals to reproduce and rejected any form of "sexual amputation" as a violation of natural and divine law. He also expressed his belief in the common social vision of fascism, eugenics, and Catholicism. The Church showed charity towards the sick and infirm, and so too did fascism have a humane and ethical purpose. The regime, he believed, aimed to use science to cure defectives and guarantee all Italians better lives. And in its policies on birth control, fascism elevated the moral standards of Italian society and defended Christian values. The "fascist state", he concluded, was a "moral state" because its social legislation conformed to Catholic teaching on the family.<sup>69</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 See, A. J. Gregor, *Young Mussolini and the Intellectual Origins of Fascism* (Berkeley, 1979); and his *The Ideology of Fascism: The Rationale of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1969).
- 2 G. Pancaldi, *Darwin in Italia: Impresa scientifica e frontieri culturali*, p.184.
- 3 S. Lanaro, *Nazione e lavoro: Saggio sulla cultura borghese in Italia, 1870-1925*, esp. pp. 85-87.
- 4 *Problems in Eugenics: The First International Eugenics Congress, 1912*, part of a series of reprints, *The History of Hereditarian Thought*, C. Rosenberg, ed. (London, 1984), p. xi.
- 5 Ibid., p. xiii. On Sergi (1841-1936), see the commemorative volume of the *Rivista di Antropologia*, XX (1915-1916), especially the article by E. Troilo, "Della scienza dell'essenza all scienza dell'uomo", pp.14-17.
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## Population and Progress

This chapter seeks to address the paradoxical nature of Italian population policy. That a developing capitalist nation which had long exported excess labour abroad and exploited cheap labour at home should chose to boost the birthrate seems somewhat baffling. Some scholars have seen the demographic campaign as confirmation of the incoherence of fascist planning. The launch of pronatalist schemes appears to be a reckless strategy in a poor country already suffering from chronic overpopulation.<sup>1</sup> And others have argued that the 'battle for the birthrate' marked a significant departure from fascism's original objective of economic modernisation.<sup>2</sup>

Prewar science lends insight into the peculiar logic behind the dictatorship's fecundity drive. Another characteristic which distinguished Italian eugenics from foreign movements, the problem of economic development figured prominently in discussions of racial advancement. Engaging in a lively debate on Thomas Robert Malthus' doctrine of overpopulation, eugenicists in Italy came to believe demographic growth accelerated the rate of agricultural and industrial expansion. They issued powerful arguments advocating population increase as a solution to Italy's plight as an inferior capitalist nation. Their views exerted a profound influence on the aspirations of Italian fascism for a prolific and productive nation.

### *Agriculture and Subsistence*

Rapid industrial growth in Italy after 1880 coincided with agricultural crisis. Depression hit cereal producers after 1873 as prices began to decline on the world market. The Depretis government's policy of tariffs on wheat imports in 1887 protected the home market from foreign incursion. But state intervention failed to rectify the long-term problem of the uneven development of Italian agriculture. While propertied wheat producers benefited from state support, the Italian peasantry carried the full brunt of bolstering commercially invertebrate agriculture.<sup>3</sup>

In the aftermath of protection, food prices rose, as did rural taxation, unemployment and flight. The depletion of cultivable land, the deterioration of sharecropping and smallholding, and the emergence of a landless peasantry threw the Italian countryside into crisis.<sup>4</sup> Pronounced regional variation in industrial expansion accentuated the



agrarian problem. Concentrated in the northern mainland, industry did not absorb the nation's large reserve of displaced rural labour. Increasing emigration from the South in the last decades of the century confirmed the failure of protectionism to encourage steady economic growth in backward regions.<sup>5</sup>

As a consequence of agricultural depression, coupled with the problem of a growing urban population to feed, the question of subsistence dominated economics at this time. Translated into Italian in the late 1860s, Malthus' 1803 edition of *An Essay on the Principle of Population* failed to capture much attention until two decades later. The widespread hunger and want which characterised the lives of many Italians in the newly unified nation perhaps awakened a belated interest in the pessimistic prophecies of an earlier English reformer. Malthus had set out to study the factors which "impeded the progress of mankind towards happiness".<sup>6</sup> He found the primary causes of human misery in unrestrained population growth and inalterable productive constraints. Italian theorists challenged this view by arguing that the means of production in a modern economy progressively increased to accommodate rising social demand for goods and food.

The most outspoken of Malthus' critics and a prominent socialist economist, Achille Loria rejected the principle of overpopulation and devised an alternative pronatalist theory. Loria began his attack by pointing out that many of Malthus' predictions had proven wrong. Far from being a prolific age of incessant demographic increment, Loria believed, the nineteenth century had brought modest population growth due primarily to the achievement of prolonged life. And the pressure of excess population in rural Italy, he maintained, caused crisis because existent economic arrangements in the countryside benefited only the rich and landed. In his first major work on this subject, *The Law of Population and the Social System*, which was published in 1882, Loria argued that "reproductive power" did not remain constant as Malthus had erroneously posited.<sup>7</sup> To dispute Malthus' premise of the "uncontrolled nature of man's passions"<sup>8</sup>, Loria gave an analysis of population change which drew heavily from evolutionary and biological theories. He postulated that "carnal instinct", his version of Malthus' concept of the instinctual urge to procreate, actually decreased in individuals as civilisation advanced.<sup>9</sup>

Although a socialist who was primarily concerned with the problem

of raising living standards for the poor, Loria agreed with other eugenicists on the issue of fertility control. He saw population as the most important factor in economic and social progress and wrote: "nations which artificially limit their fecundity arrive at bestial corruptions". Degeneration of carnal instinct served "to kill the family ideal, to shake the foundation of civilisation, and to destroy the sentiment of social duty". A European, in his opinion, represented "a social capital at least ten times superior to that of an Oriental".<sup>10</sup>

To defend his pronatalist position, Loria challenged Malthus' notion of natural limits to the means of subsistence. Malthus had believed that population increased in a geometrical ratio and doubled every 25 years. The means of subsistence, in contrast, grew along a slower arithmetical progression in Malthus' estimation. The increments of agricultural production did not keep pace with those of population growth, so food supply, even under favourable conditions, would inevitably fail to meet rising demographic demand. Malthus identified these two differing rates as an immutable natural law which led to a conflict between population and subsistence.<sup>11</sup> Loria claimed that Malthus' mathematical calculations were no longer valid in an era characterised by great progress and innovation.

Advanced by improvements in cultivation, Italian agriculture, Loria believed, would comfortably accommodate the needs of a thriving population. Although he did not specify by what margin he wanted the Italian population to boom, he envisaged a sharp and sustained increase in the rate of growth. He also articulated a plan for a prodigious expansion of agricultural output and efficiency. A rural policy aimed at augmenting the productivity of the land without sacrificing the fertility of the soil, he stated, would encourage agricultural production to arrive at near-exponential growth. By distributing rural property and wealth more evenly, he believed, agrarian reforms would raise levels of internal consumption, increase national self-sufficiency in food production, and free Italian agriculture from export dependency. In his view, these changes would lay the necessary foundation for industrial progress and national prosperity too. Far from bringing misery, as Malthus had contended, excess population contributed to economic development by enlarging the rural and manufacturing labour force. Under optimum conditions, both

demographic and economic growth maintained a buoyant and healthy equilibrium.<sup>12</sup>

In his book entitled, *Malthus*, which was published in 1911, Loria described his ideal of a healthy population system. Loria pronounced Malthus' advocacy of moral restraint to be typical of a "repressed clergyman and frigid Englishman". He found the idea of sexual abstinence both repugnant and unnatural. A so-called prudent measure to check constant population growth, celibacy before marriage, he charged, encouraged prostitution and illegitimacy. And he thought neo-malthusians who stood in favour of contraception were morally corrupted and misguided about the economy. In the place of Malthus' outmoded law of population, Loria substituted another based on his equation of carnal instinct with capitalist instinct. Biological needs and urges, he believed, governed economic relations. Sexual deprivation led to the atrophy of the race's energy and enthusiasm for enterprise and work, and weakened the drive to create a strong and competitive economy. Population growth stimulated capitalist accumulation and expansion by putting pressure on people to increase wealth and productivity. But a vital precondition for demographic growth, Italian agriculture, Loria argued, had to be thoroughly modernised. He proposed that land ownership and tenure arrangements be made more equitable and fair, arable land be extended through public reclamation and irrigation projects, and improvements in yield be introduced through widespread use of machinery and chemicals.<sup>13</sup>

The renowned economist, Augusto Mortara echoed this appeal for a long-term agricultural policy. He saw the seeds of civil war in a rural Italy wracked by poverty. Mortara warned that widespread peasant discontent and land hunger led to the growth of socialist organisations in the formerly passive countryside. Because of emigration, large territories in Calabria, Sardinia, Apulia, and elsewhere, had become depopulated and barren. He too wished to see Italian agriculture contribute to the industrial expansion of an integrated and balanced national economy. And like Loria, Mortara criticised the logic of Malthus' arguments in favour of birth limitation. He believed Italy could sustain a substantial rise in population so long as an increase in agricultural productivity accompanied this growth.<sup>14</sup>

In his volume, *The Duties of the Landed Estate and the Social Question*, which was re-issued with an introduction by Loria in 1912,

Mortara took an 1815 volume by Malthus on the same subject as a point of departure for an investigation into differences in methods of cultivation and rural incomes. The landed class had become parasitic and unpatriotic in their drive to realise profit at a cost to the nation's chief natural endowment, the land. They deforested woodland and depleted the soil with no thought for the future. Mortara argued that Italian propertied élites should recognise their social responsibility by reversing the trend towards the progressive impoverishment of the land by means of sound investments in new technique and equipment to upstay soil fertility.<sup>15</sup>

A chronic hindrance to economic development, the *mezzadria*, he argued, encouraged landlord mismanagement, indolent cultivation, and peasant impoverishment. This mainstay of Italian agriculture must be reformed through new contract agreements to increase the subsistence levels of sharecropping families and to improve the productivity of *poderi*. He called for a revival of the countryside through the spread of small ownership into cleared waste and wet land. The extension of tillage by means of reclamation works, together with re-settlement schemes to create a stable and large propertied peasantry, he believed, would provide Italy with the requisites for a healthy rural economy. Only with this vital precondition met through radical revision of systems of land ownership and tenure could Italy hope to become a powerful industrial nation.<sup>16</sup>

Italian economists saw backward agriculture as a disadvantage to an industrialising nation. In confronting this problem, they came to extol the virtues of peasant proprietorship and improved sharecropping as forms of farming which encouraged fertility. Whereas casual and salaried workers with no investment in the land guarded family size, smallholders and tenant farmers placed a premium on expanding the labour power of the household economy. In their idealised versions of the Italian countryside, they harked back to the goals of earlier agrarian reformers before them.<sup>17</sup>

But they did not believe that Italy should remain a thoroughly rustic nation. Their ruralism placed a pronounced emphasis on laying the preparatory framework for a balanced and even development of industrial capitalism through agricultural modernisation. They may have chosen to ignore the compelling evidence which emigration afforded of intense demographic pressures in deprived rural areas.

Part of the cycle of poverty and scarcity which afflicted agricultural regions, high infant mortality belied the myth of a robust peasantry. They neglected to consider the possibility too that a small country like Italy possessed finite resources. Limits to the amount of reclamable land and to the ability of labour-intensive cultivation to lift agriculture well above subsistence may have been seen as confirmation of Malthus' theory of productive constraints. But Italian economists strove instead to present an alternative vision of a fecund Italy. According to them, a revived and abundant agriculture would nourish a populous Italy and generate economic expansion.

### *The Sterility of the Middle Class*

Widening differentials in class marital fertility became a major theme in eugenic writings. In the nineteenth century, the professional middle class and the nobility kept child output low mostly through late marriage. By the 1880s official statistics seemed to suggest that Italian élites had recourse to birth control.<sup>18</sup> Under early industrialism, the traditional structure of rural households remained intact as average family size in underdeveloped regions decreased only slightly during this period. And the urban working class still reproduced much like their rural counterparts, though the fertility pattern for city dwellers began to shift towards fewer children and longer intervals between birth.<sup>19</sup>

Distinct regional differences in birthrate became marked for the first time after 1910, when the industrialised North experienced a heavy fall in fertility. The declining birthrate affected agricultural regions only slightly; Apulia, Calabria, and Basilicata still showed remarkably high levels of fertility. Varying rates of urban and rural fertility emerged as one consequence of industrialisation. The populations of cities grew rapidly in the period 1880 to 1915 but mainly because of migration from the countryside.<sup>20</sup>

Italy's drop in natality was neither urgent nor precipitate. Compared to the reproductive performance of other Europeans, Italians still propagated at an exceptional rate. A peculiar distinction of Italy in this period of general European fertility decline, the kingdom produced a sizable excess of annual births over deaths, one index of a population's prospects for replenishment.<sup>21</sup> Yet, after a century of demographic growth, the coincidence of this sudden downturn with industrialisation caused distress. Eugenicists believed a

dwindling away of the country's supply of future workers made the economy most vulnerable precisely at the moment of industrial take-off. They anticipated Italy would follow the path of more advanced nations like England and France, which had long since renounced a lively birthrate as a precondition for population growth.<sup>22</sup> The birth and death rates of these countries came too perilously close to parity for Italian observers to contemplate that Italy might not share their fate as moribund races.

Italian eugenicists began to develop theories about the causes of differences in class fertility. Achille Loria upturned Galton's theory of the biological superiority of the upper orders. He detected the signs of advanced moral degeneracy in members of the middle class. Italian élites, he believed, were a parasitic bunch of liars and swindlers who lived off the sweated earnings of others. Inherited wealth and privilege though corrupted the character and constitution of family strains and progressively weakened their fertility. Loria depicted the middle class as the Italian race's true repository of injurious inheritance. In contrast, he saw the working-class achievement of higher fecundity as an index of better reproductive fitness in a darwinian sense. Though they were innately ill-suited to command wealth and influence, the inferior orders, he argued, had a "pronounced aptitude for procreation". Eugenics, he urged, must strive to preserve proletarian sexual energy for the sake of racial survival.<sup>23</sup>

Alfredo Niceforo did not share Loria's enthusiasm over the reproductive proficiency of the proletariat. In his paper at the 1912 conference, Niceforo claimed to have discovered a natural order determining class structure. The arrested evolutionary development of some individuals predisposed them to assume their allotted place amongst the poor. In his opinion, the working class suffered from moral and physical cretinism, an inheritable trait which they passed on to their children. Anthropometric data confirmed to him that the lower orders displayed advanced symptoms of this degenerative disorder. Their smaller cranial circumference and stunted yet stocky stature made for a physical apparatus thoroughly unable to endure mental fatigue but perfectly adapted to do rough manual labour. The inborn inferiority of the poor accounted for striking class disparities in rates of illness and death. Though sickly, working-

class people showed a greater propensity towards sexual precocity and promiscuity than individuals with a far worthier inheritance. The bad breeding and low hereditary endowment of the labouring classes, Niceforo warned, threatened to defoul the race.<sup>24</sup>

Vilfredo Pareto, the sociologist, described differing class fertility as a cause of political degeneration. The fecundity of the proletariat, together with the sterility of the ruling class, he believed, led to greater "social circulation". As members of the lower orders moved upward to replenish the higher orders, those aspirants left behind grew jealous and resentful. This mechanism of social replacement revived a weary population system, but also led to conflict as the losers of the struggle of natural selection organised and rebelled. The numerical preponderance of the masses became equated in Pareto's mind with their potential political might as a revolutionary force. And the greater fertility of the working class seemed to him evidence of the eventual extinction of Italian élites and society's natural tendency towards ever more popular forms of democracy.<sup>25</sup>

The arguments of Pareto and Niceforo were minority opinions within Italian eugenics. Scientists in Italy transformed the class dimension of English eugenics by focusing their ambitions for the future on the proletariat. Precisely because they stood lower down on the evolutionary scale, the inferior orders, eugenicists thought, were uniquely adapted to become reproducers of the race.

#### ***Proletarian Prolificity and National Productivity***

In his first major publication, the 1912 *Demographic Factors in the Evolution of Nations*, Gini outlined his position on the hereditary contribution of the working class to the race. He made a direct reference to Pareto's concept of social circulation when he stated that proletarian fertility led to the *rinsanguamento* of a lethargic population.<sup>26</sup> The progressive weakening of sex drive, he believed, affected the working class less than it did the upper class who had advanced farther along the evolutionary parabola. Contesting Malthus' theory of the constancy of procreative urge, Gini maintained that a population's sexual powers and biological vitality varied according to class. The "generative instinct to reproduce the race" had become exhausted in the superior orders because they were "aged" and "senile". Challenging Malthus' belief that the lower orders should

practice family limitation<sup>27</sup>, Gini argued:

"Artificially stimulating reproduction in the higher classes, and checking that of the lower classes, would be equivalent to trying to improve society by prolonging the life of the old and infirm and preventing new generations from taking their place."<sup>28</sup>

The task of Italian eugenics, he believed, was to encourage the young and virile proletariat to propagate even more earnestly.

Gini viewed a population system as a sophisticated biological organism, subject to irrevocable laws of natural evolution. According to his theory of demographic metabolism, high reproductive output correlated positively with a range of desirable racial traits like longevity and resistance to disease. Gini attributed the cause of a number of symptoms of degeneration, such as predisposition to alcoholism, syphilis, tuberculosis, stillbirth, miscarriage, sickness and early death, to diminished sex vigour.<sup>29</sup> Prolific people with an abundance of sexual energy, he argued, were a superior breed with strong bodies and sound nervous systems. The connection made between reproductive fitness and physical health explains why the fascist regime later argued that the implementation of a pronatalist policy would result in reduced mortality and morbidity in Italy.

Gini posited that an individual's "generative instinct" determined all body functions. When vital powers deteriorated, so too did the entire physical chemistry of the organism begin to degenerate. The upper classes, he argued, had lost their sexual appetite and as a result had become infecund. The production of a ready and plentiful supply of sperm and ova was Gini's measure of sexual potency. He defined sterility as a syndrome characterised not only by inability to reproduce but also by a tendency to produce defective or inferior gametes. Upper-class progeny carried the taint of demographic exhaustion in their poor constitutions and physiques. The underlying reproductive disorder caused them to be less robust and healthy than the offspring of their sexually voracious social inferiors.<sup>30</sup>

The middle class led sedentary and intellectual lives, he asserted, because of spent sexual stamina. They enjoyed less frequent and less energetic sexual intercourse than the working class. Thoroughly evolved and civilised, the upper class nonetheless paid a big price for their refinement in a loss of sexual desire and reproductive fitness. Gini described characteristics of their urbane and cosmopolitan lifestyles as further evidence of their impotency. Their



pronounced proclivity to marry late, limit family size, and spend income on leisure accelerated the biological mechanisms for fertility decline. And personality disorders like social ambition, career success, and individual fulfillment were other symptoms of the sexual malady afflicting Italian élites.<sup>31</sup>

In his 1912 work and throughout his career, Gini associated sexual potency with bodily energy, specifically the ability to do rigorous manual labour. He defined an aggressive sex drive as a healthy sign of an industrious, disciplined, and efficient worker. Challenging the emphasis on machines in marxist interpretations of economic progress, Gini asserted that the individual was the most important agent in production. Stature, pigmentation, stamina, and musculature had their part to play as factors influencing levels of output. But the innate fecundity of a body type was the crucial variable. Hyperfecundity caused a worker to be highly resistant to fatigue.<sup>32</sup>

A self-professed biological materialist, Gini equated "proletarian prolificity" with "national productivity".<sup>33</sup> Like classical economists, he recognised the importance of labour supply as a primary factor in commodity production and capital accumulation. He divided society into productive and non-productive spheres of economic activity. As mental workers, the bourgeoisie, he argued, inhabited a world divorced from production and contributed little to increasing national wealth. As manual workers, the proletariat engaged in productive labour by creating commodities. He believed that the rate of economic development increased in direct proportion to the quantity of society's producers.<sup>34</sup>

In his book *The Amount and Composition of the Wealth of Nations*, which was published in 1914, and which earned him more international acclaim, Gini argued that demographic degeneration caused economic regression. He described Italy's economy as a "diseased and dying body" desperately in need of new blood. Only an increased supply of productive labour, Gini diagnosed, could resuscitate Italy's lifeless industry and agriculture. He plunged into a grim reverie about the future and gave an account of his apocalyptic vision of economic reversion to a lower stage of development. Should the birthrate continue to drop, he warned, the nation's economic destiny looked bleak. Capitalist modes of production would deteriorate rapidly, commerce and finance would crumple, sparse and scattered agrarian

communities would arise, and the economy would degenerate to a primitive state characterised by barter, forage, and pillage. A nation deprived of many indigeneous resources, Italy had to replenish its store of "human capital", he argued, in order to compensate for financial and natural deficiencies.<sup>35</sup> Augusto Mortara shared Gini's concern that continued "depopulation" spelled impending economic doom. In a book published in 1914, Mortara expressed his nagging fear that population decline would make his haunting "nightmare" of Italy's economic decay come true.<sup>36</sup> No more than "numbers" as Mussolini would later echo, the prolific proletariat had become to these men of science the raw material needed to fuel economic progress.

***Population and the Wealth and Power of Nations***

Italian eugenics promoted the belief that population growth would increase the wealth and power of the nation. From a military point of view, Corrado Gini argued, Italy could ill afford to tolerate birthrate decline. The United States enjoyed the geographic advantage of distance from potential European rivals, as well as a strong economy and thriving population. British naval supremacy stood unchallenged. And the great power's isolation as an island nation reduced the risks of foreign invasion. A huge empire, Russia kept its population continually mobilised in a large army which protected frontiers. Deprived of these assets, Italy possessed no natural defense against territorial threat. Vulnerable to attack as a continental power with inland and seaboard borders, Italy had to increase the numerical strength of its armed forces in order to ensure national security.<sup>37</sup>

Demographic growth, Gini asserted, also reduced threats to law and order. The power of the state to control population movement grew as a direct consequence of increased density, he believed. Brigands, subversives and criminals alike would have little chance of survival if the police and army could seek out and destroy the internal enemy more effectively.<sup>38</sup> In addition to his consideration of questions of military and policing prowess, Gini disagreed with optimistic appraisals of the economic and social effects of the decreased birthrate. He challenged those "malthusians" who saw population decrement as a precondition for higher incomes and living standards, improved consumption, and general improvements in health and welfare.

When the race's "reproductivity" degenerated, he contested, capital

accumulation and investment, credit and currency exchange, commerce and trade, and property values also declined. In his *Demographic Factors in the Evolution of Nations*, he wrote:

If a population remains stationary or declines...then national wealth, expressed in the supply of money, will decrease; property values and the land market, dependent on the number of households and social demand, will decline rapidly.... The entire process of accumulation will cease....<sup>39</sup>

Demographic downturn depressed market forces, led to economic stagnation and subsequent decline. Arrested development of the housing and land markets somehow accounted for Italy's bad industrial performance and kept the economy backward and uncompetitive. Gini defined the stimulus to commodity production and increased consumption in a peculiar way. He dismissed the relevance of fluctuations in wage and employment levels to production and consumption. The sheer size and number of households rather than the amount of disposable income of families determined demand for manufactured goods.

Not trained as an economist, Gini may have failed to capture the complexity of the problem of economic development. Despite this weakness, his argument rested on a clear assumption. He stated quite unequivocally that "the most powerful stimulus to capital accumulation is the reproductive instinct". Without the incentive which the drive to reproduce the race provided, capitalists had no desire to "constantly realise profit to increase the wealth of the family patrimony and the security of future generations".<sup>40</sup>

The size of working families had a direct impact on national levels of labour productivity. Labourers in industry and agriculture with no family or few children, he argued, lacked the motivation needed to endure long hours and bad pay. Prolific fathers made the most "productive, deferential, and obedient workers" because they faced the difficult task of maintaining a large brood of dependents. Poverty was an "effective inducement" for workers to take on extra shifts and supplementary jobs in order to ensure family survival. Childless and single workers, on the other hand, showed a destructive propensity to indulge in "selfish and unpatriotic agitation and strikes to get better contracts and conditions". Low wages and job insecurity too favourably affected rates of output and efficiency by increasing competition and rivalry in the labour market. The "scarcity of labour", he believed, impeded the beneficial process of "rigorous selection of the most fit and disciplined labourers". When population

shrank, employers were forced to hire "the most deficient and unruly elements from the working class at an grossly inflated price".<sup>41</sup>

The link between reproduction and production formed the basis of Gini's theory of demographic degeneration. The simple conflation of sex drive and the work ethic provided a powerful argument for those who wished to see Italy become a strong industrial nation. But whether Italy could halt the progressive impoverishment of the race's "generative" and "capitalist" instincts remained unanswered.

#### *The Eugenic Programme for Racial Defense*

Neither Gini nor other eugenicists ever answered the essential question posed by eugenics. Whether social change could bring about biological improvement seemed an intractable problem to them all. Although Gini accepted that "habitat and education effected racial adaptations", he reluctantly admitted he did not understand the mechanism. Despite the predicament of science's rudimentary knowledge of evolution and inheritance, Gini did not hesitate to define a eugenic programme geared at "stimulating proletarian sexuality". He advocated "eugenic interventions" aimed at creating a social environment suitable for "maximum natality".<sup>42</sup>

In his *Demographic Factors in the Evolution of Nations*, Gini offered a range of eugenic remedies prefiguring the fecundity drive he helped to mount under fascism. The entire state apparatus, the bureaucracy, civil administration, the judiciary, the police, and public institutions for welfare and education must be mobilised, he maintained, in a campaign for racial survival. Along with "negative" eugenic measures against celibacy, the state should provide "positive" incentives for Italians to increase fertility in the form of financial benefits for large families. But purely economic encouragements, like those contemplated in France, he stressed, could not possibly alter the race's genetic disposition to diminished sex vigour.<sup>43</sup>

The tempo of modern life under industrial capitalism had undercut sexual prowess, in his opinion, by destroying "family sentiment". He fretted over rising expectations of affluence as a symptom of a cultural decline which made Italians selfish and hedonistic. Individualism and materialism augured ill for the future of the family. A discrete malaise infected the whole national community as the traditional values and the moral stamp of Italians disappeared. New role models for citizen behaviour were needed, he held, to invoke the

Italian people to join the struggle for racial survival. The government should launch a patriotic crusade to create civic unity and solidarity in the face of this imminent danger to the race. "Tempes-  
tive reforms for racial defence" were needed, he believed, to inculcate the belief that "procreation was the supreme political duty of Italians".<sup>44</sup>

Gini believed that a broad pronatalist policy would succeed in engineering "radical mutations" in the collective psychology and the reproductive habits of the Italian citizenry. The impact of reforms and propaganda, he affirmed, would be felt in the space of one generation alone. The battle for the birthrate though had to be fought on many fronts. And to win the struggle, government had to rely on both consent and coercion to mobilise the masses. Stimulants to propagation, such as fiscal benefits, and punitive measures, such as a celibacy tax, promised to provide persuasive motifs for Italian sexual comportment.<sup>45</sup>

Italian eugenics seemed singularly determined to discover ways to manipulate the masses in a desirable evolutionary direction. Roberto Michels argued in 1918 that industrial capitalism had magnified the difficulty of effective governance by "increasing pressures from below" and "raising expectations of happiness and wellbeing". He thought consent would become harder to achieve in a complex, individualistic, and fast society. By focusing narrowly on economic issues, socialism, he argued, had proved itself incapable of inspired political leadership in a postwar Italy. Government, he warned, would have to organise the values and lifestyles of citizens in order to maintain power. He saw the adoption of a policy for "social penetration" as the only way forward for the modern state.<sup>46</sup>

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### **The Degeneration of Italian Motherhood**

The war brought new themes to the forefront of eugenic debate. Scientists looked with some concern at the profound changes to Italian society which wartime mobilisation had wrought. Food shortages and economic hardship after 1916 put public health on the agenda, while disturbing demographic trends renewed interest in racial degeneration.<sup>1</sup> Eugenicists formulated plans for social intervention to increase the birthrate. Their commitment to the cause of welfare reform reflected the underlying belief that public health betterment would revive the race. New patterns of family size and female fertility placed women at the centre of their programme for postwar social reconstruction.

#### ***The Health and Welfare of the Race***

Soon to become Italy's first professor of comparative racial demography, Franco Savorgnan studied the negative impact of the war on the nation's population. In a book published in 1918, the statistician blamed high female employment in traditionally male armaments and heavy industries for weakening Italy's progeny. After 1915, the rate of stillbirths rose dramatically as a consequence, he concluded, of the influx of women into factory employment. The work of mothers outside the home decreased the vigour of the Italian stirp; and changing standards of women's appropriate place forced unnatural cultural adaptations in the female species. Like many of his colleagues, Savorgnan voiced his fears that the Italian woman of the near future would deplore the necessity of childbearing and abhor the constraints of marriage. In his opinion, maternal instinct had already begun to degenerate, rendering many women "desexed", "unfeminine", "unreproductive", and "unfit" for motherhood. Bad rearing and little nurturance accounted for the poor quality of wartime infants.<sup>2</sup>

Another "diseugenic" influence on racial health, age distribution within the general population had shifted enormously during the war when strong young men were in such short supply. Because women had been left at the homefront with older, less virile men whose offspring were prone to physical degeneration, rates of sexual invalidism were destined to rise in the postwar period, Savorgnan believed. Infant mortality for under-one-year-olds peaked in 1918 but did not reach higher prewar levels despite food scarcity. Savorgnan commented on

increased birth weights amongst newborns, which he attributed to the longer intervals between pregnancy characterising new patterns of female fertility. Although this trend may have offset some of the worse effects of race degeneracy, the war generation, he affirmed, still suffered from diminished robustness due to disruptions to family life. Especially worrying to him, the evolutionary advancement of womanhood through increased opportunities beyond the domestic sphere seemed to beckon a new generation of Italian women to fill the ranks of the nation's reproductive degenerates. He saw decreased commitment to motherhood and marriage as the biggest obstacle to postwar social order.<sup>3</sup>

Dismay over the future of the family compelled eugenicists like Savorgnan to morally censure the much publicised figure of the new woman worker. Others agreed that women's employment outside the home was thoroughly incompatible with motherhood. Women who earned their own income became "egotistical", lost their "feminine virtues of self-denial and nurturance", and, most frightening of all, "learned to practice birth control". A "sexual revolution" causing women to gain increased control over reproduction seemed to threaten the race with extinction.<sup>4</sup> In postwar Italy, many observers felt that the "relations between the sexes" had to be restored to a "natural inequality" as a precondition for population growth.<sup>5</sup>

Added to the threat posed by the loss of women's procreative instinct, other health hazards endangered the race. Giorgio Mortara expressed great dissatisfaction with the nation's wartime reproductive output. He believed the social climate and conditions of mobilisation had put the Italian population on an irregular and perhaps irreversible evolutionary course towards decreased growth and vitality. Hunger and riots in the cities, military discipline on the shopfloor, food requisitions, labour shortages in the countryside, rising inflation, and lowered living standards had all "weakened the social organism" and "arrested racial development". Further damaging the race's prospects, public institutions of health and welfare had proven to be too incompetent to prevent epidemic and malnutrition.<sup>6</sup>

Levels of tuberculosis amongst children soared in 1917 as a result of poor quality control and distribution within the livestock and milk industries. In the summer of 1918, an outbreak of influenza caused the death of over 600,000 people, Mortara recounted. Recurring episodes of

typhoid, cholera, and meningitis weakened racial germ-plasm and imperilled future generations. Along with these debilitating diseases, malaria rose above prewar levels and re-emerged as a major killer. The deathrate of children between the ages of five and ten years increased dramatically because of a resurgence and extension of child labour in industry and agriculture. The establishment of military zones and the mass movement of soldiers had increased the spread of sexual contagions despite the commercialisation of prophylactics by war authorities. Men rejected for armed service on grounds of ill-health and handicap had propagated throughout the war. All this evidence provided Mortara with compelling proof of the enormous health problems the postwar generation would face.<sup>7</sup>

But the worse symptom of all, the birthrate dropped perilously low during the war. The Italian people seemed intent on committing collective suicide. Infected by a "social pathogen", the race indulged a pronounced predilection for "the pernicious habit of birth control". To Mortara, the price of armed conflict seemed to be a "fateful regression in sexual morality". Although marriages and births picked up some momentum between 1919 and 1920, they failed to reach prewar levels. And mobilisation had caused illegitimacy and abandonment to rise. After the armistice, this upsurge continued. Mortara attributed the cause of these demographic trends to "sexual modernism". What he called "the sentiment of antinatalism" seemed to be growing in the Italian people. As if that were not bad enough, Italians appeared to him to have become immoral and promiscuous as a result of the social transformations of war.<sup>8</sup>

During the war years, the proportion of abandoned infants grew from just under forty to well over seventy percent of all illegitimates. An increase in casual sex amongst the unrestrained youth of Italy accounted for the rise in parental desertion, Mortara believed. In the prewar era, he maintained, "irregular unions" tended to be stable despite the contribution which emigration and rural flight made to the illegitimate birthrate. But the wartime absence of male heads of households, soldiers' deaths and disappearance, and largescale urban migration completely fragmented family and community networks of social control. The presence of troops on the homefront increased opportunities for sexual commerce and favoured the "proliferation of occasional illicit coupling."<sup>9</sup>

And demobilisation accelerated processes of social and sexual flux and instability. Along with the rapid formation of new families after the cessation of hostilities, numerous other couples openly lived together outside of marriage. Mortara saw a particularly troubling source of nonmarital cohabitation in the large ranks of young war widows. Because they lost entitlement to their husbands' pension upon remarriage, these women had a material incentive to stay outside the confines of acceptable middle-class morality. In 1920, sexual order completely collapsed, he believed, as illegitimacy rates shot upwards even in rural regions. Because traditional foreign outlets closed to Italian emigration, demobilised men flooded the countryside and caused an upheaval of "immorality". The rise in "extra-legal copulation" shattered his image of rural Italy as a last refuge from the rollicking lifestyles of the metropolis. The new morality which emerged from wartime drudgery and deprivation had infected the young who, Mortara believed, now indulged in sex as a recreational activity. The staggered return of love-starved men from the front, he asserted, prolonged the cycle of sexual euphoria gripping the Italian peninsula and islands.<sup>10</sup>

Achille Loria shared Mortara's concern over the physical and moral decay of the Italian race. In a book published in 1921, the economist described the social and economic costs of Italian belligerence. He elaborated on Mortara's scenario of rampant sexual profligacy, disrespect for traditional values, and the impatient pursuit of pleasure, which supposedly characterised postwar youth. A "sex mania", he declared, threatened to consume the energy of the race in barren and wasteful pastime. The young seemed to have cultivated an unhealthy disdain for work and family. He saw the seeds of a frightening "social and economic involution" in these signs of race degeneration. The economy devastated and productive forces depleted, he stated, Italy could not afford to tolerate the wave of youth rebellion. Loria called for a policy of racial defense to fortify the social fabric and to prepare the young for their role as the nation's labour force. A revival of those time-worn attributes of the Italian race, morality and health, he believed, would ensure Italy's future prosperity.<sup>11</sup>

#### *The Science of Fecundability*

Preoccupations about declining health and morality engendered debate about sexual differentiation. In the prewar era, Enrico

Morselli had bemoaned the fact that the Italian woman of the future would have smaller breasts and slimmer thighs as her body adapted to evolutionary changes in society.<sup>12</sup> In his study of the sexual order, which was published in 1914, Roberto Michels elaborated on Lombroso's theory of the moral inferiority of women.

Michels depicted women as "lower animals" who had to be restrained within the confines of marriage because of their moral infirmity. He believed in a "natural male instinct" which drove all men to be aggressive and promiscuous. Women, on the other hand, played the game of "erotic coquetry" in order to entice suitors. Feminine nature, he argued, dictated that women invite pursuit from men, feign modesty, and finally submit to sex. To support this contention, Michels investigated what he called "seduction". He asserted that "feminine resistance to manifestations of male sexual desire" were "an empty form" and that a "violated woman" was "always an accessory to her defilement". He disputed whether rape existed given women's confused and impaired psychology. Legal enquiries in rape cases routinely showed the "girl to be a consenting party in most cases". And, he continued: "the successful consummation of rape...goes far to justify the belief that she set no very high price upon what she lost". Michels concluded with strong words about the "legal and social subjugation of women" as a natural consequence of female inferiority and as a desirable means to protect "feminine virtues and honour" from predatory males.<sup>13</sup>

In the postwar era, Italian eugenicists incorporated attitudes about the moral necessity of sexual differentiation into evolutionary biology. In 1916, Nicola Pende, eugenics' first influential medical thinker, became preoccupied by what he defined as a rising rate of "female reproductive disorders". Modern women, he believed, lacked a "maternal instinct" and had become "infecund" as a result. To conserve the race, Pende advocated that women undergo a rigorous "education" from an early age in order to make them more "feminine" and "motherly".<sup>14</sup> In 1923, Pende, a professor of pathology at the University of Bari, claimed he had discovered a new science which he named biotypology. Pende's principal concern was to demonstrate that a connection existed between physical type and human behaviour. Viewing the body as a total system, subject to the laws of evolution, he wanted to prove that disfunction in any one part set the whole

biological and mental organism awry.<sup>16</sup>

Reworking darwinian notions of reproductive fitness, Pende believed that muscular, skeletal, and metabolic differences between men and women determined their separate but complementary sex roles. He viewed the human organism as a quadrilateral pyramid with each side representing the various constituents of evolutionary inheritance. The four elements of biopsychological make-up comprised body shape, the neurochemical system, affective traits, and intelligence. These components of constitution and personality, he believed, followed the dictates of "orthogenesis" whereby they evolved in determinate directions through environmental and social pressures. While the whole function of the human organism was fertility maintenance, evolution could proceed in a "pathological" way, thereby forcing biological and psychological adaptations which rendered the body "deviant" or "sterile". The aims of his science were to correct these evolutionary mistakes and to insure that the race ceased to produce infertile variants.<sup>16</sup>

Pende classified constitutional variants and their sub-categories, and attributed specific behavioural patterns to each body type.<sup>17</sup> A large number of Italian men, he reckoned, were sexually defective, and most of these unfit males belonged to the "hypogenital" variety who exhibited physical characteristics of their deviance. Hypogenitalism predisposed the body to eunuchoidism because of deficiencies of internal humoral secretions which caused impaired sexual development. Their penises small and sperm scant, these men were unsound in reproductive terms. Because they lacked a "strong heterosexual physique and temperament", hypogenital men were especially prone to become homosexuals. An "unnatural" psychological symptom of this disorder, these "pseudo-hermaphroditic" men acted more like women and children and were less aggressive than "normal" men.<sup>18</sup>

For his views on the determinants of masculinity, Pende owed an intellectual debt to the French neurologist, Charles-Édouard Brown-Séquard, who first defined the aims of endocrinology in 1891, and whose work was translated into Italian in 1894. Concerned with discovering ways to increase "potency", the French scientist believed internal testicular secretions to be the cause of the "most noble attributes in man". A diminishment of sperm production because of old-age or infirmity, he recorded in his clinical notes, caused men to become "less intelligent, honest, ambitious, and courageous than real

men".<sup>19</sup> In the last decades of his life, Brown-Séquard devoted himself to the problem of "rejuvenation". At the age of 74, he began to inject himself with "seminal extract", a compound made from the ground-up testicles of dogs and guinea-pigs, in order to increase his body's "nervous force". After repeated injections of the serum, Brown-Séquard observed an increase in the distance he could propel a jet of urine. The scientist also believed the fluid could be sold commercially as a cure for constipation and senility, as well as a remedy to improve sexual performance and virility.<sup>20</sup>

Italian zoology in the 1920s focused almost exclusively on the study of sex difference. Scientists attempted to correlate fecundity with the "outward manifestations of manhood" in frogs, roosters, and pigeons, and they drew human analogies from their observation of lower animal behaviour. Brown-Séquard's influence could be felt in clinical trials on frogs who were castrated and then given the testicular extract. This research seemed to confirm that frogs had a "healthy and highly masculine libido even when made sterile", because they apparently became very aroused and aggressive once injected with the serum.<sup>21</sup> Alessandro Chigi, the director of a poultry-breeding institute in Rovigo, imported three male wild roosters from Java and let them loose amongst his fowl. He reported that the Javanese breed possessed far more pronounced male character traits than ordinary domestic cocks. They "dominated the hens, separated them from their legitimate husbands, and forced them to copulate". The foreign birds also took more mates on average than the Italian variety. The experiment, however, supported his conviction that interbreeding caused damage as few of the hybrid offspring proved to be fecund. On the strength of these results, Chigi presented a paper arguing in favour of the sexual segregation of the races to preserve Italian fecundity.<sup>22</sup>

Although Italian scientists had not yet isolated or extracted male or female sex hormones, they attempted to define what was normal sexuality.<sup>23</sup> Pende based his views on femininity on a belief that women's personality and physiology derived from a balance of genital, thyreoid, and pituitary gland secretions. When functioning properly, the female organism evolved into a perfect body type characterised by fatty deposits, little muscle, round shoulders, large breasts, and heavy thighs. Civilised women, Pende believed, more frequently pos-

sessed disproportionately broad hips than did women from primitive races.<sup>23</sup>

Asthenic women, however, were slender and masculine in shape due to an overactivity of thyroid secretions. They were distinguished by specific hypogenital attributes such as small, upright breasts, a flat stomach, boyish thighs, and a slight moustache, and these symptoms indicated the biological sterility of the organism. Hypogenital women were socially deviant too. These types of female behaved like men because they could be sexually aggressive, selfish, and ambitious. Their tendency towards sexual degeneracy was evidenced in genital malfunctioning. "Inverted females", these impaired women experienced primary sexual pleasure from clitoral stimulation rather than penetration. Because they possessed "hyper-evolved vulvae" and "under-developed uteruses", they frequently showed a sexual preference for members of their own sex. Pende also attributed a volatile personality and a low intelligence to the physical condition of "heterosexual deformity".<sup>24</sup>

Another biotype, "the hypopituitary constitution", comprised men and women who showed specific psychological and physical "stigmata" associated with sexual immaturity and intellectual precocity. Pende described the hypopituitary male as a flabby, effeminate, and slothful somatotype who suffered from a pronounced underdevelopment of the primary sexual organs, a lack of libido, and recurrent and sometimes chronic impotence. Because of their inadequacies, these men possessed depressive natures and often turned to mental pursuits to compensate for sexual deficiencies. Intellectuals and radicals, these men were emotional and irritable, critical and disruptive of social order. Hypopituitary women deviated from Pende's norm by presenting masculine physical and mental traits. Abnormal development in this type of woman evidenced itself too in an asexual temperament and infertile constitution. The most striking attribute of the hypopituitary female was their unusual propensity towards intellectual endeavour and rational thought, which Pende considered to be absent in normal women.<sup>25</sup>

Deficiencies in testicular and ovarian function caused "hypothyroid" men and women to be more imaginative than normal people. Excitable and tense, these types were prone to a childish disposition because of lack of mammary and penis development, body hair, and



libido. Other biotypes comprised the "hyperpituitary woman" who exhibited male characteristics like muscular tone and physical strength. Her extreme upper-body development disturbed her ovarian balance and rendered the system "unreproductive". The "infantile female", a cross between the pure hypothyroid and hypopituitary types, possessed an overly developed heart and aorta which caused her to be submissive and self-denying. And the brains of "hyperadult" woman showed congenital abnormalities and lesions which inclined her towards forms of behaviour more typical of a man, such as decisiveness and authoritativeness.<sup>26</sup>

According to Pende, the "normal" male was ostentatiously virile and manly. This biologically superior type was extremely fertile, evidenced by the precocious size of his genitals, a strong sex drive, and the abundance and potency of seminal fluid. "Hypergenital" man's perfect mate was the "hyperovarian" woman, who produced more ova than the average female. Though some hyperovarian women had an "active libido", determined by an "exaggerated sensitivity of the secondary sexual organs, the breasts and vulva", most possessed a more modest "feminine" nature reflecting their "hyperfecundity". This type of woman bore the physical signs of her primary mission to reproduce the race. The "prematernal woman" was slim and narrow in her lower body, but these were temporary masculine traits. As she grew into full womanhood, and "after a long exercise of her biological and social function of bearing and rearing offspring", the "normal" woman evolved into a "mature maternal type". Her hips and breasts enlarged, the maternal biotype exhibited the "stigmata of motherhood". A "reproductive apparatus fully adapted to nourish and defend the fruit of her womb", hyperovarian woman was Pende's ideal of femininity.<sup>27</sup>

Appointed to a directorship of a biotypology clinic at the University of Rome in 1925, Nicola Pende began to conduct biometric research on women patients. Based on measurements of body proportions and investigations of reproductive histories, Pende reported that 62 percent of all Italian women were hyperovarian. Less than half that number of British and German women could be deemed hyperfecund, Pende asserted proudly. And most Italian men, he observed, enjoyed a pronounced hypergenital disposition. More fertile and sexual because of their superior constitutions, Italians, he believed, produced a greater number of gametes and a better quality sex-cell than any other

race.<sup>28</sup>

### *Biological Politics*

The discoveries of biotypology perfectly encapsulated the concerns and values of the fascist regime. Studies of the biological and social determinants of fertility proliferated throughout the period. Eugenicists eagerly correlated eye colour, physical attractiveness, stature, obesity, length of the nose, time spent at the toilet, and a number of other factors, with psychosexual development.<sup>29</sup> One study showed that dress was a "demographic variable" which directly influenced the birthrate. Elegant and well-groomed women, Carlaiberto Grillenzoni argued, possessed a pronounced "antimaternal nature" and were a detriment to the race.<sup>30</sup> Another took Italian university professors as a sample group to examine the causes of middle-class sterility. This investigation demonstrated that scientists and philosophers were more prone to "hypofecundity" than those intellectuals who engaged in "practical" disciplines like architecture or engineering.<sup>31</sup>

Corrado Gini lent his expertise in demography to discover the underlying causes of infant mortality. As director of ISTAT, Gini completed a study of Italy's fecund population in 1928. Incorporating research he had conducted on the war generation<sup>32</sup>, Gini argued that patterns of female fertility had no bearing on the survivability of infants. These results seemed to conflict with sociological and medical research which showed that the shorter interval between births and the longer reproductive cycles of prolific mothers adversely affected the life chances of their children.<sup>33</sup> Gini ignored this evidence and chose to demonstrate a positive connection between fecundity and adult mortality. High fertility, he believed, accounted for the longevity and robustness of highly-sexed people.<sup>34</sup>

Research on hypofecundity advanced the cause of biotypology even further. The consensus within the medical community was that over 75 percent of marital infertility was caused by women's endocrine disorders. At the top of the list of major factors influencing female fertility stood gracility, thinness, excessive sport, career ambition, and intellectual pursuits. In 1934, the regime opened the first fascist sterility clinic at the Salsomaggiore mineral baths. There thousands of women took training courses on motherhood to revive maternal instinct and underwent the water cure to stimulate ovarian activity.<sup>35</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 For a description of wartime hardship, see G. Procacci, "Popular Protest and Labour Conflict in Italy, 1915-1918," *Social History*, XIV (January, 1989), pp. 31-58.
- 2 F. Savorgnan (1879-1963), *La guerra e la popolazione* (Bologna, 1918), p. 132. See also his *Demografia di guerra e altri saggi* (Bologna, 1921). Beginning in 1929, Savorgnan taught demography at the University of Rome, an appointment he later converted into a platform for fascist racism and anti-semitism. He directed ISTAT from 1932 to 1943, and presided over the Italian Society of Economics, Demography, and Statistics from 1943 to 1945. Savorgnan, joined by other eugenicists like Alfredo Niceforo and Nicola Pende, was part of the growing scientific lobby putting pressure on the regime in the mid thirties to promulgate racist legislation.
- 3 F. Savorgnan, *La fecondità dell'aristocrazia* (Pisa, 1942), pp. 144; 147; 150; 155. Based on research compiled throughout the war, this 1942 volume was an expanded version of work presented at the Italian Eugenics Society's first postwar convention in September 1924 in Milan.
- 4 For a review of the nationalist press' call for demobilised female labour to make way for returning veterans, see E. Mondello, *La Nuova Italiana: La donna nella stampa e nella cultura del ventennio* (Rome, 1987), p. 22.
- 5 F. Virgilli, *Il problema della popolazione* (Milan, 1924), pp. 6-7; see also A. Lorenzoni, "L'impiego delle donne nell'industria e sue conseguenze sulla natalità" in *Popolazione e fascismo*, pp. 69-73.
- 6 G. Mortara (1885-1967), *La salute pubblica in Italia durante e dopo la guerra* (Bari, 1925), pp. 1-2. A statistician and demographer first at Messina and then at Rome University from 1909 to 1938, Mortara was impelled to leave Italy because of the anti-semitic legislation. For an overview of his career, L. Lenti, "La vita e le opere di Giorgio Mortara," *Giornale degli Economisti*, XXVI (1967), pp. 199-218.
- 7 *La salute*, pp. 9-10; 513-15; 517.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 451; 461.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 458-60.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 458; 462.
- 11 A. Loria, *Aspetti sociali ed economici della guerra mondiale* (Milan, 1921), pp. 327-36; 454-56.
- 12 E. Morselli, *Antropologia generale*, pp. 1308-10. See also G. Sergi, *Per l'educazione e la coltura della donna* (Turin, 1892); and *La donna nelle scienze dell'uomo*, V. Babini, F. Minuz, and A. Tagliavini, eds. (Milan, 1986), pp. 34-48 on arguments about

women's irrational nature.

- 13 See C. Lombroso, "Imbecillità morale in donna ladra e prostituta", *Archivio di Psichiatria e Scienze Penali*, II (1881), pp. 198-204. R. Michels, *Sexual Ethics: A Study of Borderland Questions* (London, 1914), pp. 121-26; 131-32; 150-62. See also, C. Pogliano, "Aldo Mieli, storico della scienza", *Belfagor*, XXXVIII (September, 1983), pp. 537-59 on neo-lombrosian arguments about women's sexuality.
- 14 See Pogliano, "Scienza e stirpe", pp. 89-90 on Pende.
- 15 N. Pende, *La biotipologia umana* (Palermo, 1924), pp. 9-11; 23-27; and see his *Dalla medicina alla sociologia* (Palermo, 1922), which argues that the social application of endocrinology can improve the race.
- 16 See E. Schreider, "L'École biotipologique Italienne: Tendances et méthodes", in *Bulletin de la Société de Biotypologie*, I (December, 1932), pp. 64-97; M. Barbera, *Ortogenesi e biotipologia* (Rome, 1943) on "morphological" adaptations of the human body in definite directions; and S. J. Gould, *Ontogeny and Phylogeny* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1977).
- 17 For similar trends in American science, see G. Draper, *Disease and the Man* (English edition, London, 1930), on classification of the disease potentials of morbid body types.
- 18 N. Pende, *Constitutional Inadequacies* (Philadelphia, 1930), pp. 3-30; 265-69; and his "Costituzione e fecondità" in *Proceedings of the International Congress for Studies on Population*, III (Rome, 1933), pp. 77-103.
- 19 J. M. D. Olmsted, *Charles-Édouard Brown-Séquard: A Nineteenth-Century Neurologist and Endocrinologist* (Baltimore, 1946), pp. 105-17.
- 20 See the Italian translation of L. H. Goizet's, *Forza e salute: La vita prolungata col metodo Brown-Séquard* (Milan 1894), pp. 19-27; 36.
- 21 A. Chigi, "Costituzione e fertilità", in *Proceedings of the International Congress on Population*, III, pp. 63-75. For a discussion of similar trends in the United States, see D. L. Hall, "Biology, Sex Hormones, and Sexism in the 1920s", *The Philosophical Forum*, V, nos. 1-2 (Fall/Winter, 1973-74), pp. 81-96.
- 22 Chigi, "Costituzione", pp. 71-72.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 73; and N. Pende, *Bonifica umana razionale e biologia politica* (Bologna, 1933), pp. 112-13 on his clinical method.
- 24 Pende, "Costituzione e fecondità", pp. 80-81.
- 25 *Bonifica umana razionale e biologia politica*, pp. 114-15 on

- "femininity indices".
- 26 Schreider, "L'École biotypologique Italienne", p. 85.
- 27 *Bonifica umana razionale*, p. 110.
- 28 "Costituzione e fecondità", p. 75.
- 29 See C. Foà, "I fattori biologici della diminuzione delle nascite", *Proceedings of the International Congress for Studies on Population*, II (Rome, 1934), pp. 9-57 on "lethal factors" which "frustrate fecundation"; see also G. Battara, *Fattori psicologici e morali di denatalità* (Florence, 1935), esp. pp. 102-103 on religion. See also, F. Loffredo, *La politica della famiglia* (Milan 1938), pp. 35-6 on moral factors in depopulation.
- 30 S. Grillenzoni, "I caratteri del fisico e del vestire considerati come fattori demografici", in *Proceedings*, II, pp. 261-69.
- 31 M. Boldrini and C. Mengarelli, "Caratteri costituzionali di un gruppo di intellettuali Italiani", *Proceedings*, III, pp. 269-85.
- 32 C. Gini, "Gli effetti eugenici e disgenici della guerra", *Genus*, I, nos. 1-2 (June, 1934), pp. 29-43; his *Problemi sociologici della guerra* (Bologna, 1921); and his "La natalità e la potenza delle nazioni" in *Il Popolo di Roma*, 29 and 30 January 1928.
- 33 Gini, "Altri risultati delle indagini sulle famiglie numerose", *Proceedings*, V, pp. 355-93.
- 34 F. Dessau, "Contributo allo studio etico-sociale della struttura della famiglia", *Proceedings*, VIII (Rome, 1933), pp. 37-65, a generational study of infant mortality in 10 working-class families in Rome; and G. B. Allaria, *Il problema demografico del regno osservato da un pediatra* (Turin, 1929), pp. 17-19 on "preventable" infant mortality.
- 35 D. Piragine, "Sterilità: Cure termali, politica demografica fascista", *Difesa Sociale*, V (December, 1938), pp. 1272-76; see also M. Bolletti, "Sport femminili e la salute della razza", *Difesa della Razza*, III (February, 1940), pp. 12-14 on the regime's policy towards women's athletics.

PART II.  
THE WELFARE REVOLUTION IN LAW AND PRACTICE

Massimo di natalità, minimo di mortalità; e i due aspetti del fenomeno sono interdipendenti. Difatti, quando la natalità si abassa, non è vero che la mortalità si abbassi; è vero il contrario. È vero, inoltre, che le Nazioni invecchiano e che ad un certo momento la natura imporrà le sue leggi inesorabili. Le Nazioni invecchiate avranno il tracollo formidabile della loro popolazione, poichè l'igiene, il migliorato tenore di vita, tutto può contribuire a prolungare la vita, e, del resto, voi m'insegnate, il prolungamento medio della vita umana in Italia è salita di dodici anni, ma ad un certo momento la falce cade. Mi saprete dire, fra dieci e quindici anni, che cosa sarà successo nelle Nazioni che già oggi presentano dei sintomi di senilità?

Benito Mussolini  
1928

**ONMI LEGISLATION: 1925-1934**

Whether Mussolini modernised Italy is still an open question. Victoria de Grazia has lent new insight into this problem. In her study of the *Dopolavoro*, de Grazia gave a balanced assessment of the regime's successes and failures in gaining popular support through state after-work programmes.<sup>1</sup> Tim Mason recently urged historians to continue in their endeavours to bridge the divide between abstract theories and real histories of fascism. Further research on fascist institutions and policy, he argued, was needed to reveal how the dictatorship developed in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter attempts to contribute to this ongoing debate by reflecting on the aims and achievements of fascist social legislation. The regime turned pronatalist ideology into public policy with the creation of the National Organisation for the Protection of Motherhood and Infancy in 1925. This chapter examines ONMI's founding statutes, financial and administrative structure, and institutional development in an attempt to assess whether the regime built a viable and efficient welfare apparatus.

***The Liberal Roots of the Fascist Welfare Revolution***

ONMI's legislative history predated the advent of fascism. Four months before Mussolini's March on Rome on 30 October 1922, the Italian senate declared all existing health and welfare laws for women and children to be fragmentary and insufficient. Between 1865 and 1890, successive local government acts set mandatory budgeting requirements for the provision of aid for foundlings. Other categories of women and children fell outside the sphere of statutory public services. The liberal parliament passed only a handful of timid laws protecting women and children, and most of these had failed to have much of an impact. They included the 1907 law on work, the 1913 law on alcohol in schools, the 1918 law on wetnurses, the 1919 law on tuberculosis, and the 1921 contagious diseases act. Apart from these enactments, the 1865 civil code and the various laws on public sanitation promulgated after 1859 contained a few scattered dispositions covering women and children. After the senate's endorsement of a formal enquiry, a royal commission began to investigate the question of social assistance towards women and children on 9 June 1922.<sup>3</sup>

After their first meeting in June, the commission disbanded into four sub-committees, then adjourned indefinitely. While all 22 commissioners advocated some form of central control of services, they remained divided about the exact form state involvement should take. Because of the war deficit, financial considerations shifted discussion towards a mixed public and private funding scheme. Foreign precedents also confused them. Some preferred to establish an Italian variant of the English model of a children's bureau within the Ministry of Home Affairs. Others wished to avoid creating a separate bureaucracy altogether, as had the Spanish, Danish, and German governments which spread responsibility amongst competent health and educational ministries. But the massive state organisations for child welfare established in France and Belgium attracted little interest.<sup>4</sup>

On 22 December 1922, the new Prime Minister exhumed the inquiry report from the parliament's archives and formally dismantled the commission. Mussolini appointed a team to prepare a legislative design to fit his plans for a radical overhaul of government administration. After deliberations, the council voted in favour of following the Belgian model of a centralised parastate institution. Although the Under-Secretary of the Interior, Aldo Finzi, assessed the project in early 1923, the regime's political instability deferred parliamentary review. Not until 8 December 1924 did the Interior Minister, Luigi Federzoni, present the proposal to the senate, who voted in favour of minor amendments. Final senate approval for the revised bill came on 10 June 1925, after which it successfully passed through the lower house.<sup>5</sup>

By creating a national welfare organisation, the law of 10 December 1925 satisfied Mussolini's state-building aspirations. And the eugenic community found reassurance in ONMI's objectives. The report which accompanied the findings of the fascist commission stated:

"Children are the vital lymph glands of the economy, ... Italy must join the family of civilised countries who have recognised how social hygiene can be used by governments to increase the productive forces of the nation.... The children of today are the citizens of tomorrow; therefore we must insure that they are raised rationally and scientifically so that Italy's young generation will be healthy and industrious."<sup>6</sup>

The 1924 legislative design also emphasised the regenerative effects



of welfare. Federzoni declared the protection of motherhood and infancy to be "an urgent political and eugenic matter" and ONMI to be a "force for the defense, preservation, and progress of the race".<sup>7</sup>

Despite this optimistic appraisal, the 1925 legislation left important questions unanswered. Pressing parliamentarians to accept his 1924 legislative design, Federzoni had assured sceptics that the new organisation would not create any additional expenditure for the state treasury.<sup>8</sup> But just how ONMI could reconcile its vast programme with the government's desire to economise on welfare spending remained a mystery.

#### ***ONMI: Legislative Achievement***

ONMI's founding statutes of 10 December 1925 contained 25 articles which defined the broad shape and scope of the new organisation.<sup>9</sup> The regulation which followed on 15 April 1926 comprised 238 articles divided into six separate titles outlining the structure and programme of ONMI. As Mussolini later noted in his Ascension Day Speech, the most recent statistics showed that about 5,730 institutions in Italy cared for women and children.<sup>10</sup> ONMI gained control of this welfare establishment, which provincial and municipal governments had administered in the liberal period. Because most of these institutions catered to infants, ONMI determined to encourage the development of more services for women.

Centralisation of welfare administration stood out as the principal innovation of fascist reforms. The April decree described ONMI's institutional form as a three-tiered hierarchy in which the national leadership oversaw the implementation of policy by provincial and municipal representatives.<sup>11</sup> Another novelty, the 1926 *regolamento* recognised the necessity of creating a tight infrastructure of services throughout the nation. Regional and local variation in the number and quality of charitable institutions had become a chronic weakness of public beneficence under liberalism. The 1926 law addressed the problem of acute differences in resources which kept poor and rural areas outside the sphere of social development. Organisational guidelines specified that ONMI's provincial leaders should seek to meet the particular needs of local communities by setting responsive welfare targets, allocating special funds, and planning new initiatives. The 1926 promissory package of reforms laid great stress on transforming the patchy pattern of provision

into an even and uniform national health system.<sup>12</sup>

To promote institutional development, the 1926 regulation gave ONMI a considerable presence in big cities and small towns throughout the nation. Together with plans to create ONMI councils in every province and municipality, the enactment outlined clear directives for the establishment of neighborhood committees. Large communes like Milan, Rome and Turin were to be divided into manageable zones comprising as few as 5,000 inhabitants. These administrative districts, the legislation specified, would correspond to working-class *rioni* and *quartieri*. In metropolitan centres, ONMI would mediate between state and society. And in rural Italy, the organisation would help to redress the terms of social backwardness by building a network of services which reached even the most outlying areas.<sup>13</sup>

Continual experimentation by trial and error characterised the process of forging an administrative apparatus for state provision. Between 1925 and 1939, the fascist government passed four laws and four decrees which made adjustments to ONMI's structure and programme.<sup>14</sup> This chapter examines this legislation to evaluate the extent of the planning and expertise which went behind welfare reforms.

#### ***Welfare Leadership in the New Italy***

Reduced to 13 members in 1934, ONMI's national leadership comprised 38 councillors in April 1926.<sup>15</sup> The 1926 regulation installed within the central directorate two senators and two deputies as compulsory government delegates, and a team of specialists chosen from prominent charities, government departments, and voluntary organisations. ONMI would recruit consultants from the Ministries of Public Education, Justice, Public Health, the National Economy, and Foreign Affairs, who would form internal commissions for the review of legislation and policy on various aspects of welfare.<sup>16</sup>

The 1926 regulation expressed the goal of creating a new type of public servant who was not a career bureaucrat but a competent technical expert. Membership in the central directorate extended to professionals from the Italian Paediatric Society, the Italian Obstetrics and Gynaecology Society, the Italian Eugenics Society, the National Organisation for Handicapped War Orphans, and the Italian Red Cross. The technocratic aspirations of the legislation came out

clearly in those clauses describing ONMI's leadership as enlightened men of science who would apply their knowledge to the business of social planning.<sup>17</sup>

The regulation made provision for women's participation in welfare administration. Article 3 acknowledged the special contribution women could make as mothers and Catholics dedicated to the cause of the advancement of motherhood and infancy in Italian society. One delegate each from Catholic Action's Union of Women and the National Council of Italian Women would join the central commission. The statutes also conceded to the fascist party a direct say in policy-making by inviting a representative of the *fasci femminili* to join the select council of five advisors to the president of the organisation.<sup>18</sup>

Other clauses specified that lay and ecclesiastical members of the Catholic community should also be given access to state service in ONMI's central, provincial and municipal councils. The Italian government now welcomed diocesan bishops and parish priests into public administration. This dramatic move reversed the 1890 prohibition Prime Minister Crispi had placed on the appointment of ecclesiasts in the Congregations of Charity which oversaw the *opere pie* and were accountable to the prefects.<sup>19</sup> Recognition of the predominance of pious over public institutions of welfare in Italy seemed to be the motivation behind this policy. By encouraging lay Catholics to embrace the new fascist institution, the regulation also aimed to assure ONMI would have a dedicated following amongst the nation's nobility and philanthropists who formed the governing class of private charities.<sup>20</sup>

The Catholic community gave official approbation to ONMI. Beginning in early 1926, the *Osservatore Romano* ran a number of articles on the Christian content of social assistance under fascism.<sup>21</sup> And in a series of addresses to Catholic Action's *Uomini Cattolici*, *Gioventù Cattolica*, and *Unione delle Donne* in January 1927, Pius XI called on Catholics to engage in an "effusion of charity to affirm the sacred mission of the Church".<sup>22</sup> Although the Pope drew a distinction between public provision and Church relief, the mobilisation of the Catholic charitable establishment would certainly be advantageous to a regime concerned with minimising the costs of welfare reform.

### *Welfare Administration*

Granted the status of an autonomous state agency by the 1926 regulation, ONMI nonetheless never developed a stable administrative structure. The organisation required officials equipped with precise guidelines on the exercise of responsibilities and some security of tenure to plan policy. The conferment of bureaucratic rank and contractual regimen on office may have helped national leaders make pragmatic decisions about the future. But appointments were honorary and temporary, and officials enjoyed no salary as reward for state service.<sup>23</sup> As a result, many ONMI leaders, including the organisation's first president, Baron Gian Alberto Blanc, mixed their casual commitments to ONMI with fixed employment elsewhere.<sup>24</sup>

ONMI's central administration had only the formal appearance of a government bureaucracy. Together with the lack of any internal mechanism for promotion from a provincial or municipal post to one in Rome, the absence of a fixed leadership left institutional consolidation to chance. Similarly, not until December 1929 did the organisation begin to tackle the problem of a civil service personnel at the central headquarters. Approved by the Interior Ministry at the end of the month, a contract set standards for the employment of clerical staff. The motive behind this move was the desperate need the central headquarters had for office workers, librarians, and researchers. After the announcement of an open competition for jobs, the agency hired 76 employees. Although the 1926 regulation called for a continued expansion of central administration to accommodate the gradual implementation of ONMI's huge programme, the number of salaried help in Rome had barely doubled by 1938.<sup>25</sup>

But ONMI never granted its white-collar staff the status of public employees. By 1934, less than half of the office workers in Rome had been systematised on fifteen-year civil service contracts which qualified them for a number of benefits and perquisites. Four years later, the majority of these government workers still remained subject to the terms of labour in private industry.<sup>26</sup> This sort of irregularity may have kept personnel expenditure to a minimum, but it also placed constraints on institutional growth and efficiency.

On a provincial and municipal level too, ONMI relied on a volunteer leadership. National leaders experienced great difficulty creating local committees as a result. The work of organising ONMI

federations devolved upon prefects and party secretaries, who chose candidates.<sup>27</sup> National leaders realised early in 1927 that a majority of the 24 provincial federations which had been formed by that date were comprised of officials who had no experience of welfare work. In January 1927, Baron Blanc issued an angry circular to prefects and party *federali* warning them to follow the instructions outlined in the 1926 regulation by appointing only qualified professionals. The purpose of the new institution, he stated, was not to serve personal or political interests but to improve the health and welfare of the race. To remedy the situation, Blanc ordered more than half of the federations to be dismantled and re-organised. Despite these directives, control over the process of administrative overhaul still belonged to the party and the prefects.<sup>28</sup>

Recruitment practice as a rule narrowed ONMI's horizons. By 1936, ONMI federations functioned in all 92 of the kingdom's provinces. But the organisation's president from 1937 to 1940, Carlo Bergamaschi admitted that this figure stretched the truth by a wide margin. Over a third of these, he stated in an official publication, existed on paper only, while a large portion of the remaining federations implemented only selective programmes. He singled out a few federations, like those in Milan, Bologna and Rome which had managed to create some form of integrated services, but these examples proved the exception. Welfare organisation under fascism still differed widely from one province to the next.<sup>29</sup>

Another organisational liability, ONMI statutes specified that the costs of building an administrative apparatus should fall on provincial and municipal governments. The 1926 regulation and the revision law of 24 December 1934 defined the exact terms of this obligation. Government authorities were called upon to provide ONMI's *federali* and *comitati* with free buildings, furniture, equipment, and staff.<sup>30</sup> When first implemented in late 1926, this requirement caused a great deal of chaos. Many provincial and municipal governments had already begun to remove welfare expenditure entirely from their budgets in the expectation that ONMI would now carry the full administrative and financial burden.<sup>31</sup>

When ONMI leaders attempted to impose rulings on rent-free space and administrative facilities in early 1927, they met with refusal and obstruction from provincial delegations. Many provincial

governments complained that they still faced a backlog of debts dating back to the war and could not set aside scarce funds for ONMI. Negotiations over this matter slowed the pace of institutional development on a provincial level. While 42 of ONMI's federations eventually received venues from provincial governments, most of these donations came in the middle of the next decade and even later. In the meantime, provincial leaders had to make do with cramped office space in foundling homes, party secretariats, hospitals, or the prefecture. Many of the finer *palazzi* that housed ONMI provincial headquarters were gifts from prominent philanthropic families. And, in some cases, public appeals for funds managed to raise enough money for the construction of new buildings.<sup>32</sup> The national leadership faced the same problem of a makeshift and borrowed administration. After over a decade of moving from one unsuitable building to another, the national headquarters of the organisation opened its own offices along the Tiber in April 1938.<sup>33</sup>

The development of the municipal committees dragged on even longer. Provincial federations worked with mayors to mobilise local élites and create *comitati*.<sup>34</sup> To provide ONMI with offices, those town governments actually committed to welfare reform sought donations from private institutions and citizens, public bodies, employer associations, and banks. By 1937, however, over 4,000 of the kingdom's 7,350 communes still lacked an ONMI committee. And the organisation's first official inspections that year revealed many of those which had been deemed "functioning" in provincial reports to Rome were largely "fictitious", according to Bergamaschi. Although the national leadership had no clear idea about how many municipalities had actually carried on welfare work throughout the preceding period, Bergamaschi estimated that as many as one third of the 3,000 functional committees had been mismanaged, perfunctory, and incompetent all along.<sup>35</sup>

The 1926 legislation defined welfare as an instrument of social development. But ONMI never managed to break new ground in local communities where its institutional presence remained scant throughout the fascist period. A lack of adequate resources to build a welfare apparatus figured as the single most important obstacle to administrative growth. And without a network of municipal agencies, ONMI stood little chance of ever implementing even a fraction of the

1926 reform programme.

***The Structure and Finance of Welfare***

The 1926 enactment defined ONMI as the institutional means to tighten the structure of services by centralising their control. New welfare leaders repeatedly criticised liberalism for having abdicated central authority over the edifice of welfare. The considerable autonomy granted local governments in budgeting beneficent expenditure during the liberal period, these arguments maintained, had obstructed the development of an integrated system of social assistance.<sup>36</sup> According to the *regolamento*, and subsequent legislation, ONMI would overcome this defect by regulating spending and planning. The 1926 act stated that the relationship between ONMI's central and peripheral organs would be "collaborative" and "close".<sup>37</sup>

In reality, however, centralisation proved to be a rigid and impractical solution which did not befit such a geographically diverse nation. The 1926 statutes preserved in essence the system of beneficent funding established under liberalism.<sup>38</sup> Rather than channel money raised locally through the prefecture, the new arrangement called on ONMI leaders to collect contributions from private and public institutions, Congregations of Charity, and communal governments and direct them to central headquarters. The structure remained unaltered although ONMI now gained control over the process. And, as in the old 1890 ruling, statutory contributions from local authorities were redistributed from the central fund in the form of grants. In the past, prefects had complained of widespread evasion and continual arrears in their beneficent accounts. ONMI *federali* were now placed in the same adversarial position on the local level, and were not equipped with adequate personnel and resources to supervise this complicated financial system properly. As a result, many provincial federations would go on to accumulate massive debts because they failed to collect mandatory contributions from local authorities.<sup>39</sup>

A big difference from the procedure established under liberalism, however, ONMI provincial federations did not enjoy the same autonomy local governments had previously exercised in budgeting allocations. The grants' system which the national leadership put into effect in early 1926 made the size of the award issued to provincial federa-

tions conditional upon fulfilment of mandatory welfare targets. This punitive guideline deprived already disadvantaged areas of financial support from ONMI's central fund. From 1926 to 1929, for example, Baron Blanc favoured those provinces which were better equipped with services by making the grant proportional to the number of welfare institutions and the number of women and children assisted in each ONMI administration.<sup>40</sup>

As a consequence, a province like Milan with 262 active communal committees and over 700 different welfare institutions received a larger grant than a poor province like Mantua with 62 underfunded *comitati*.<sup>41</sup> Provincial ONMI leaders in Mantua complained to the central directorate that between 1926 and 1928 they had been unable to distribute money to any of their communal committees, and, as a result, only 48 of these actually functioned in any discernible way. Because the province lacked a founding home and other public and private institutions, ONMI *federali* received a small grant from the national leadership. The inequalities built into the funding scheme inevitably hindered welfare development. Milanese leaders proudly claimed that between 1926 and 1928 they had assisted 5,500 women and children; Mantuan authorities, by contrast, had handled only 78 relief cases during the same period.<sup>42</sup>

Blanc explained that his overall strategy was to promote the "rationalisation" and "co-ordination" of services on a local level.<sup>43</sup> In practice, the grants' system freed ONMI of any financial responsibility to create services where they did not already exist. The pattern of grant disbursement varied geographically. Between 1926 and the end of the fiscal year in December 1931, national leaders distributed over 30 million *lire* nationwide in provincial subsidies. Northern provinces as a whole had received over twice as much money as had southern provinces. But provinces in central Italy were the main beneficiaries as they had acquired over half of all the funds.<sup>44</sup> Because underdeveloped provinces ended up being cash-starved, their communal committees were placed in the unenviable position of having to raise money locally to meet targets set in Rome, which only then qualified them for substantial awards. The conditional nature of financial benefits effectively deadlocked institutional growth.

A revised funding scheme came into effect when Sileno Fabbri, a Milanese lawyer, succeeded Blanc in January 1932. ONMI's new



president tied the amount of aid provinces received to their performance in the demographic campaign. Provinces now made requests for grants to cover a portion of outgoing expenditure on the basis of the *per capita* population within their administration. These base rates were distributed regularly from Rome after national leaders reviewed the reports *federali* prepared. According to the 1926 statutes and the procedure which emerged in their aftermath, however, national leaders could suspend funding when *federali* failed to make progress in policy implementation. Clearly, this pressure to show ONMI *dirigenti* in Rome continual improvements encouraged provincial federations to exaggerate their achievements.<sup>45</sup>

Under the new 1932 rulings, provincial federations could also claim additional "extraordinary" allowances from ONMI's social fund. The central directorate distributed 50 *lire* annually for every newborn in a province. Ostensibly designed to meet the growing volume of demand and the rising costs of care in areas with a high birthrate and a dense population, the new scheme worked to the disadvantage of many rural provinces. Northern and central provinces like Milan, Padua, and Ferrara earned almost eight times as much money under the 1932 funding directives as did provinces with a steady or declining number of inhabitants and births, like Taranto, Catania, and Cosenza. With the exception of Naples, Palermo, Siracuse, and Sassari, whose subsidies were high, the South and islands as a whole received less than a third of the total national grants from 1932 to 1938.<sup>46</sup>

The expressed policy commitment to the "improvement" rather than the growth of services hampered institutional development. In the South and islands, especially, ONMI's presence was destined to be superficial because of the insufficiency of local resources and state funding. Prefects watched over provincial ONMI leaders, and were required by law to send regular reports to Rome charting the progress of welfare. The prefect of Agrigento, in western Sicily, sent a memorandum in 1933 whose revelations contrasted with the claims made by the office of the ONMI federation there. The provincial president of ONMI had boasted that the organisation had created 24 mothers' kitchens in the capital and outlying communes. The prefect conducted an independent investigation when rumours finally reached him that ONMI had failed to do much of anything in its seven years of existence. The prefect confirmed that the mothers' kitchens did not exist

and ended his report by saying that the programme of relief which had been implemented consisted entirely of "irregular and discontinuous assistance in the form of occasional small subsidies to poor families".<sup>47</sup>

How many other southern provinces abandoned all attempts to initiate welfare programmes remained unknown until 1940 when ONMI conducted its first enquiry into the progress of reforms in Sicily. The report of the ONMI inspectorate drew a sorry profile of the network of services in Agrigento. With a population of over 400,000, the province possessed 12 mothers' kitchens by December 1938, but none of these were administered or financed directly by ONMI. ONMI leaders had managed to establish a system of home visits, but had been able to find only two volunteers to perform this service. And these "social assistants" were constrained to limit their activity to the capital because of lack of transport. The organisation had created an informal medical service by relying on the capital's seven paediatricians to share turns at a clinic which opened for four hours every week. This had been the extent of the achievement of ONMI, largely because of lack of money, inspectors reported. They also stressed that the province's high rate of infant mortality, which stood at 132 deaths out of every 1,000 first-years, had not decreased much during the fascist period.<sup>48</sup>

In theory, ONMI had the potential to alter patterns of social underdevelopment. In prosperous provinces endowed with professional and philanthropic élites, ONMI leaders could offset the paucity of state contributions with local resources, personnel, and institutions. To implement a full range of reforms, provincial federations had to become largely self-financing. Enterprising leaders could acquire donations of food, clothing, medicines, and buildings. But the 1926 regulation, and the policy directives of the new organisation, did not consider seriously enough the lack of uniformity in the nation.

The reality of welfare development in Italy underscored a much bigger role for private philanthropy than the 1926 regulation seemed to suggest. Italian charities would do fairly well under fascism. National statistics lumped all charities together, including fee-charging bodies like colleges and convents; but figures do show that the kingdom's gross charitable endowment grew enormously during the

fascist period, and especially in the years 1925 to 1935.<sup>49</sup> The social prestige attached to good works by the regime may have set high standards for responsible citizenship among Italian élites. ONMI certainly benefited enormously from private donations and bequests. In Modena, the president of the federation, a nobleman and a doctor, bought a villa for ONMI in 1928 and opened a dual-purpose home for mentally handicapped children and for unwed mothers.<sup>50</sup> One of the members of the Venetian federation organised a lottery of a clock donated by the Duce in February 1928 to raise funds for the purchase of an abandoned building in the countryside. When the countess failed to realise much profit, she made up the difference and paid for the conversion of the premises into a residential establishment for the care of sick children.<sup>51</sup>

Because of donations of this kind, which ONMI leaders rewarded with medals of *benemerenzza* in official ceremonies, the organisation amassed an enormous patrimony by the end of the 1930s.<sup>52</sup> While private funding in the voluntary sector underwent a progressive growth under fascism, it is considerably more difficult to judge the volume of state spending on welfare. Though public expenditure on all items probably experienced its greatest net increase in the period 1925 to 1930, it continued to grow throughout the next decade.<sup>53</sup> Whether the share of welfare within the whole budget kept pace with other areas like military and public works' spending appears very doubtful.<sup>54</sup> Notoriously unreliable, the regime's accounting methods changed throughout the period. However, it seems clear that the regime allocated a consistently very small percentage of public revenue for what continued to be called "beneficence" in Treasury accounts.<sup>55</sup>

With regard to state spending on ONMI, the 1925 legislation created a mixed public and private scheme. The statutes established a special *fondo* which comprised a quarter of all the revenue raised through municipal residence taxes and a variable percentage of the money collected from public pawn shops.<sup>56</sup> From an initial state allowance of four million *lire* in 1926, the volume of public investment in ONMI rose to over 108 million *lire* in 1938. The contribution from the state, however, represented only a small proportion of ONMI's total budget, and never exceeded more than eight percent of its funds.<sup>57</sup> To meet mounting costs after 1927, when ONMI

began to implement its costly illegitimacy policy,<sup>58</sup> the state gave the organisation a small portion of the money levied by fascist trade unions, and increased its share of the revenue drawn from the celibacy tax. In 1935, government withdrew the bachelor-tax contribution, although higher rates and harsher penalties progressively increased the size of the annual levy from 46 million *lire* in 1927 to over 150 million in 1934. Mussolini channeled this tax reserve into the war effort and because of the massive budget deficit after 1936 did not re-issue it to ONMI.<sup>59</sup>

After 1927, ONMI's own deficit grew so massive that Sileno Fabbri suspended social programmes in 1932. Expensive forms of aid, like cash subsidies, were particularly affected, though no single aspect of reform escaped the financial crisis. In many respects, ONMI never really recovered momentum after 1932.<sup>60</sup> To regain solvency, ONMI developed a plan for a monthly national lottery of substantial cash prizes. Presented to the Council of Ministers in November 1934, the proposal estimated that profits generated through the lottery would allow ONMI to auction off its substantial debts and eventually free the organisation from the tyranny of short-term planning. If only a small percentage of the interest payments off subscriptions were invested, the plan stated, ONMI would have the makings for a lasting financial security. Rejected initially and then again in March 1935 after re-submission of a revised version, the lottery scheme never materialised under fascism.<sup>61</sup>

### ***The Mass Organisation of Welfare***

The 1926 regulation outlined an ambitious and substantial reform programme. ONMI promised to implement a number of important innovations, not the least of which included provision for a widening of access to statutory benefits. The new rulings abolished all existing qualifications which limited entitlement to aid to only the registered poor. Articles 121 and 122 conferred universal rights to welfare to all claimants without regard to civil status, income, or domicile.<sup>62</sup>

The regulation devoted over 200 articles to a description of the types of social services ONMI would co-ordinate. Municipal committees were required by law to create clinics for mothers and babies in every commune within their administration. When resources were limited, local leaders were meant to establish mobile medical units

providing routine and emergency obstetric and paediatric care. Mothers' clinics were to be complete centres where local women would find doctors, social workers, and other specialists like puericulturists and hygienists. The vital link between ONMI and the community, clinics were conceived as institutions providing a full range of services and a continuous form of aid for women from early pregnancy to three years after the birth of their child. Through interviews, case files, and regular check-ups, medical and social staff at the clinics were to keep a close watch over the mother and her child. Clinics, the law specified, were to provide economic aid in the form of hand-outs of milk, baby clothes, and other necessities. As a special incentive for women to frequent clinics, staff were to set aside money for the regular distribution of childrearing and breast-feeding subsidies to mothers.<sup>63</sup>

When clinics integrated all forms of medical, social, and economic aid in one building, they were to be called *Casa delle Madri e dei Bambini*, ONMI's new model institution for the "rational and modern protection of mothers and babies". For the "vigilance" and "control" of childrearing, local committees were held by law to set up a system of home visits and cash subsidies for regular clients at the clinics. Home visitors were granted the right to place care orders on children found to be abandoned or abused by their parents.<sup>64</sup>

A significant part of ONMI's programme involved the dissemination of "scientific principles in breast-feeding and childrearing". To encourage *allattamento materno*, ONMI leaders were required to launch propaganda drives, using schools, clinics, factories, and unions as the institutional bases for lectures, training courses, and the distribution of literature on the merits and methods of nursing. In addition to this initiative, the regulation gave ONMI the responsibility to create a large inspectorate for the enforcement of existing protective legislation and the supervision of welfare institutions. The regulation entitled ONMI to force the closure, the merger, and the re-organisation of public and private institutions in the interests of the co-ordination and modernisation of services. Apart from providing assistance towards infants and pre-schoolers, ONMI made special provision for certain categories of children, which included the "physically and mentally abnormal", foundlings, and "juvenile delinquents". The 1926 enactment set guidelines for

provincial and municipal leaders to channel a significant portion of their funds into the development of residential facilities for the care of these adolescents.<sup>66</sup>

Although an ambitious project, ONMI seemed almost destined from the start to have only a limited impact. In his address to the senate on 20 May 1925, Ernesto Marchiafava spoke highly of the social aspirations of fascism. But he also pointed out to his audience that fervour alone was not enough to change Italian society. In contrast to the immense *volere* of the state, he stated, stood the reality of its meagre *potere*.<sup>66</sup> The regulation gave the organisation a vast programme, but financial and institutional constraints narrowed the organisation's ability to implement reforms. Unless accompanied by a more substantial cash investment from the state, ONMI would never be able to operate on the grand scale anticipated by the 1926 statutes.

## Endnotes

- 1 T. Mason, "Italy and Modernisation," *History Workshop* (Spring, 1988), pp. 127-47.
- 2 V. de Grazia, *The Culture of Consent: The Mass Organisation of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (New York, 1981).
- 3 See A. Lo Monaco-Aprile, "Lo spirito e il contenuto della legge fascista sulla protezione della maternità e dell'infanzia", *MI*, III (February, 1929), pp. 155-66; and *L'Opera nazionale per la protezione della maternità e dell'infanzia dalla sua fondazione*, pp. 231-32 for a full list of all pre-fascist legislation.
- 4 Min. Interno, CR, *Relazione del Direttore Generale dell'Amministrazione Civile sulla protezione e l'assistenza dell'infanzia nelle legislazioni moderne* (Rome, 1922), pp. 2-7; 74.
- 5 A. Lo Monaco-Aprile, "La genesi della legge per la protezione della maternità e dell'infanzia", *MI*, II (February, 1927), pp. 19-28.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p 21.
- 7 *ApS*, XXVI Legis., Sess. 1924-1929, Disegno di legge per la protezione e l'assistenza della maternità e dell'infanzia, 8 December 1924.
- 8 *Ibid.*, Discussion of 20 May 1925; and Mussolini's comments about the budget, in *ApC*, XXVII Legis., Sess. 1924-1928, Discussioni, La spesa dell'Interno, 26 May 1927.
- 9 Law of 10 December 1925, n. 2277, Protezione e assistenza della maternità e dell'infanzia, *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 7 January 1926.
- 10 Royal Decree of 15 April 1926, n. 718, Regolamento di esecuzione alla legge 10 dicembre 1925, n. 2277, *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 5 May 1926. See H. Schneider, *Making the Fascist State* (New York, 1928), pp. 99-101, on the difference between laws, royal decrees, and royal decree laws. Recent figures on the national distribution of welfare institutions indicated wide regional variation. The number and types of institutions were as follows: 27 maternal shelters; 68 subsidy agencies for nursing mothers; 50 milk depots; 119 foundling homes; 29 nurseries; 49 homes for rachitic children; 105 tuberculosis colonies; 35 summer camps; 3,291 playschools; 1,095 orphanages; 127 charities which provided income support to orphans; 14 charities which helped adolescent foundlings; 243 colleges and convents; 232 residential institutions for "deficient" children; 47 children's reform schools; 82 homes for the deaf; 102 homes for the blind; and 18 recreational facilities. These were distributed as follows:
 

Piedmont	1,645	Veneto	284	The Marches	198	The Abruzzi	85
Lombardy	1,484	Campania	274	Apulia	153	Calabria	48
Emilia	428	Liguria	265	Latium	148	Sardinia	40

Sicily 322 Tuscany 210 Umbria 93 Basilicata 19  
 See A. Lo Monaco-Aprile, "L'Assistenza della maternità e della  
 infanzia" *MI*, I (November, 1926), pp. 22-23.

- 11 R. D. 15 April 1926, titolo 1, costituzione e funzionamento dell'opera, arts. 1; 82; 103.
- 12 *Ibid.*, art. 14.
- 13 *Ibid.*, titolo 3, 1 comitati di patronato, art. 103.
- 14 See the Royal Decree Law of 21 October 1926, n. 1904, which modified the structure somewhat, in *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 22 November 1926; Law of 23 June 1927, n. 1168 gave ONMI's three branches full status as "amministrazioni di stato" in *Ibid.*, 16 July 1927; the Law of 5 January 1928, n. 239, relative to the conversion of R. D. L. 21 October 1926 into law in *Ibid.*, 28 February 1928; the Royal Decree of 24 December 1934, n. 2316, containing the summary text with amendments of statutory assistance under ONMI, in *Ibid.*, 25 February 1935; the Royal Decree of 5 September 1938, n. 2008 which brought changes to the programme, in *Ibid.*, 14 January 1939; the Law of 22 May 1939, n. 961, in *Ibid.*, 3 July 1939.
- 15 R. D. 15 April 1926, art. 2.
- 16 Legge 10 December 1925, arts. 1-2.
- 17 R. D. 15 April 1926, arts. 2; 68-70.
- 18 *Ibid.*, art. 3; for the approval of the regime's demographic campaign given by the Consiglio Nazionale delle Donne Italiane, see ACS, PCM, 1926, f. 3, sf. 12, P. 1087, richiesta di provvedimenti per repressione propaganda per limitazione delle nascite; and for information about the Countess Bice Brusati Pedotti, who joined the giunta esecutiva in 1926 as a delegate from Catholic Action, see her personal file in ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1945, b. 428, f. 163.634.
- 19 *Ibid.*, titolo 3, art. 103; on the 1890 law, see F. Nitti, *L'Assistenza pubblica in Italia: L'azione della chiesa e dello stato* (Trani, 1892), pp. 22-25; and below p. 157.
- 20 R. D. 15 April 1926, art. 37 on soci and benemeriti. Many of ONMI's fee-paying life-members and benefactors were women; see ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1945, ONMI, b. 1261, f. 509817, elenco of benemeriti on the occasion of Mother's Day celebrations, 24 December 1929.
- 21 See "Fanciulli Cattolici d'Italia", *L'Osservatore Romano*, 26 March 1926; and "Per la protezione ed assistenza della maternità e dell'infanzia: Opportuna circolare del Ministero Federzoni", in *Ibid.*, 9 June 1926.
- 22 "Per l'applicazione della legge sulla maternità ed infanzia", in *Ibid.*, 7 and 8 January 1927; and "L'Azione Cattolica è



carità" in *Ibid.*, 12 January 1927.

- 23 R. D. 15 April 1926, art. 10; ONMI's presidents included: the professor of physics, Baron Gian Alberto Blanc, May 1926-January 1932; the lawyer, Sileno Fabbri, January 1932-July 1937; the lawyer, Carlo Bergamaschi, July 1937-April 1940; Count Alessandro Frontoni, April 1940-May 1943; the lawyer, Sergio Nannini, May 1943-July 1943; the Professor of medicine, Francesco Adami, September 1943-April 1944 (during his presidency, central headquarters moved to Pedrengo, in the province of Bergamo); the prefect of Pedrengo, Dino Cagetti, May 1944-April 1945; the accountant, Silvio Radaelli, May 1945-June 1945 (during this period, central headquarters moved to Milan); Capelli Vegni, July 1945-December 1945. On a provincial and municipal level, most ONMI leaders were male professionals, and many were members of the nobility. For a typical breakdown of ONMI authority on the federal level, see ASF, ONMI, atti contabili, 1928-1944, deliberations of the provincial federation for the whole period. "Documenti ufficiali", *MI*, I (November, 1926), p. 93, for the municipal board in Rome, which included: Sante de Sanctis (senator, eugenicist); Donna Bice Tittoni (philanthropist); the Countess Daisy di Robilant (Turinese noblewoman, philanthropist); the Duchess Maria Salviati (Roman nobility, philanthropist); and the professor of medicine, Count Cesare Micheli (gynaecologist, eugenicist, married into Bourbon aristocracy). And on Milan's large municipal committee, see ACM, GP, cat. 12, ONMI, b. 378, elenco del comitato di patronato dell'ONMI, 1930, which follows this same pattern.
- 24 For details about Blanc, see ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1945, b. 691, f. 209.168, sfs. 1-2; and ACS, SPD, CR, 1922-1945, b. 81, f. W. R., sf. 1; letter dated 27 February 1930, accusing Blanc of favoritism by successfully encouraging Mussolini to appoint his son-in-law, Francesco Valagussa to the vice-presidency of ONMI. Valagussa also served on the public health council's national directorate; see ACS, Min. Interno, DGSP, AG, 1931-1932, b. 61bis., Consiglio Superiore di Sanità, seduta 18 June 1931. Blanc, a Neapolitan by birth, mixed his commitments to ONMI with membership in the Consiglio Superiore dell'Economia Nazionale and in the Gran Consiglio. Blanc spent much of his tenure as ONMI's president in Naples, organising shady business ventures to oust the huge Mellon conglomerate, the Aluminum Company of America from Italian soil, and open his own chemical works to extract the metal from leucite.
- 25 *ONMI dalla sua fondazione*, pp. 52-54.
- 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.
- 27 Law of 10 December 1925, arts. 14; 16.
- 28 ONMI, *Report on the Development of the Work of the National Institution for the Protection of Maternity and Childhood, 1926-1930* (Rome, 1932), p. 16; and see also, "Messaggio della presidenza dell'Opera Nazionale ai presidenti delle federa-

- zioni", *MI*, I (December, 1926). p. 62.
- 29 C. Bergamaschi, *L'ONMI: Motivi e proposte di riforma* (Rome, 1937), p. 12.
- 30 Law of 10 December 1925, arts. 8; 10-11; R. D. 15 April 1926, art. 14; R. D. 24 December 1934, art. 17.
- 31 *Report on the Development*, pp. 17-24.
- 32 Bergamaschi, *L'ONMI*, p. 12.
- 33 *L'ONMI dalla sua fondazione*, pp. 5-53.
- 34 R. D. 15 April 1926, titolo 3, i comitati di patronato, arts. 104-12.
- 35 Bergamaschi, *L'ONMI*, p. 12.
- 36 See, for example, G. A. Blanc, *L'ONMI* (Milan, 1928), pp. 3-8, a copy of an article which originally appeared in *Gerarchia*; S. Fabbri, "La politica demografica del regime", *Giornale d'Italia*, 21 August 1932; and A. Carelli, "Un popolo all'avanguardia", *MI*, VII (October, 1932, pp. 987-91.
- 37 R. D. 15 April 1926, titolo 1, arts. 32-33; 36.
- 38 Nitti, *L'Assistenza pubblica*, pp. 20-22; and below, pp. 157-8.
- 39 R. D. 15 April 1926, titolo 1, arts. 54; titolo 2, arts. 79-81; and Bergamaschi, *L'ONMI*, p. 17.
- 40 *Report on the Development*, p. 28.
- 41 ACS, PCM, 1928-1930, F. 1, sf. 6.2, P. 6968, B. Fabbri's relazione della federazione provinciale Milanese, 1930, p. 6.
- 42 S. Fabbri, *L'attività della federazione provinciale Milanese dell'ONMI durante il 1928*, pp. 28-32; and ACS, PCM, 1928-1930, f. 1, sf. 6.2, P. 6134, F. Maccabruni's report to Mussolini about the work of the federation, pp. 24-27.
- 43 "Seduta", *MI*, I (May, 1926), p. 89; copy of the verbali of the meeting of the executive council.
- 44 *Report on the Development*, p. 28.
- 45 S. Fabbri, "Il discorso del R. Commissario dell'Opera", *MI*, VII (March, 1932), pp. 632; 639. See also, the report on the activity of the ONMI federation of Ferrara, ACS, PCM, 1931-1933, f. 1, sf. 6.2, P. 8143, dated 27 February 1933, which claims that infant mortality had been halved in the province because of welfare work; and compare this to the more modest tone of the verbali, 1922-1944 in ACF, ONMI, atti contabili.
- 46 Bergamaschi, *L'ONMI*, pp. 12-13.

- 47 ACS, PCM, 1931-1933, f. 1, sf. 6.2, P. 8230, report from the prefect of Agrigento to ONMI leaders, which was sent to the PCM and Mussolini, 4 February 1933.
- 48 ACS, Min. Interno, GB, 1940-1941, b. 1, f. 97, relazione sul riordinamento della Sicilia (by province), piano tecnico-finanziario e situazione attuale nella provincia di Agrigento.
- 49 R. M. Russo, *La politica dell'assistenza: Storia dello sviluppo capitalistico e del sotto sviluppo assistenziale in Italia dal 1860 ai giorni nostri* (Florence, 1974), pp. 44-45.
- 50 *Report on the Development*, p. 20; see also *ONMI dalla sua fondazione*, p. 64, for a list of other generous gifts.
- 51 ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1943, b. 3, f. A. 44, Venezia-Federazione Provinciale dell'ONMI, 22 February 1928.
- 52 *ONMI dalla sua fondazione*, pp. 220-21, for a table of holdings.
- 53 Russo, *La politica dell'assistenza*, p. 45; see also F. A. Rèpaci, *La finanza Italiana nel ventennio, 1914-1932* (Turin, 1934), pp. 55-72.
- 54 G. Mortara, *Prospettive economiche*, XII (Milan, 1934), p. 567, for a review of spending in the years 1925/26 to 1932/33.
- 55 By calculations based on Mortara's tables, public welfare spending went from representing .7 percent of the total budget in 1925/26 to .8 percent in 1931/32. Ilva Vaccari estimates an increase to just over 1 percent by 1938; see *La donna nel ventennio fascista, 1919-1943* (Milan, 1978), p. 97. Compare this to military spending under fascism, in Mortara, *Prospettive economiche* (Milan, 1922), p. 338; and to beneficent spending under liberalism, Seton-Watson, *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism*, pp. 143-48; 169-71.
- 56 Law of 10 December 1925, art., 7.
- 57 *ONMI dalla sua fondazione*, p. 218, for state contributions by year.
- 58 See below, pp. 224-6.
- 59 On the bachelor tax, see Glass, *Population Policies and Movements in Europe*, pp. 236-37; and A. Boldi, *I provvedimenti tributari demografici* (Turin, 1931), pp. 33-37.
- 60 S. Fabbri, *Direttive e chiarimenti intorno allo spirito informatore della legislazione riguardante l'ONMI e alle sue pratiche applicazioni* (Rome, 1934), p. 44.
- 61 ACS, PCM, 1934-1936, f. 9, sf. 5, P. 2807, ONMI, Lotteria Nazionale, proposals of 28 November 1934 and 23 March 1935.
- 62 R. D. 15 April 1926, titolo 4, organizzazione e funzionamento

dei servizi di protezione e assistenza, arts. 121-92.

- 63 ONMI, *Il programma di sviluppo dei servizi sanitari e sociali dell'ONMI* (Rome, 1968), p. 39; and ONMI, *Istituti e preventori* (Rome, 1950), pp. 38-42.
- 64 *ONMI dalla sua fondazione*, pp. 35-42.
- 65 R. D. 15 April 1926, arts. 17-87.
- 66 *ApS*, XXVI Legis., Sess. 1924-1929, discussion of 20 May 1925.

## Women, Work, and Welfare in Fascist Italy

In his *Lectures on Fascism*, Palmiro Togliatti alluded to the "ideological hold" the regime gained over the working class by means of social policy. Although he failed to mention ONMI in his list of fascist institutions, Togliatti recognised the importance of mass organisation as a means by which to cultivate consent. And in his appraisal of fascist forms of state intervention, Togliatti argued that Mussolini possessed a keen understanding of the political benefits of public provision. He portrayed the winter-relief work of the *Ente Opera Assistenza* as an especially ingenious scheme to ward off popular discontent in a period of high unemployment.<sup>1</sup>

In her study of the regime's regimentation of leisure and sport, Victoria de Grazia also made reference to the "stabilising" effects of welfare in a fragile dictatorship. According to de Grazia, fascism attempted to mobilise support through showy public programmes aimed at "diverting" Italians from the nation's economic troubles.<sup>2</sup> Other scholars too have argued that the depression forced a government suffering from a loss of legitimacy to devise strategies for social pacification.<sup>3</sup>

Population policy does not fit this model of the origins and function of public provision under fascism. The objective of demographic increment stood as the motivation behind ONMI. And that the pronatalist campaign predated the depression challenges the prevailing view of welfare as an opportunistic bid to buy off the masses. Despite the weaknesses of a marxist interpretation of welfare, those historians who have stressed the "mediating" functions of social policies have touched upon very important questions about the nature of fascist rule.<sup>4</sup> The following two chapters seek to examine the substance of fascist reforms. Whether welfare could cause the Italian people to embrace fascism depended to a large extent on whether the regime could actually deliver the goods.

### *Women's Work under Fascism*

Any discussion of the impact of welfare must also consider the material condition of working women and their families. This section gives a schematic outline of the changes and continuities of the female labour force under fascism.

The pivot of the corporative order, the 1926 Labour Charter laid

out the principles of government policy on women's work. The charter revealed that the regime intended to redress striking disparities in male and female earnings by guaranteeing women "equal pay for equal work". Low women's wages, the charter stressed, depressed men's pay packets too. In the interests of class collaboration, the regime advocated parity in pay scales. The document also declared fascism's commitment to extending existing labour legislation to those hitherto unprotected women workers engaged in farm and home labour. And the third main objective was to organise women into fascist trade unions and thereby draw them into the system of national contracts, social insurance, the inspectorate, and the magistracy.<sup>5</sup>

Fascism did not pursue any of these goals seriously however. Nor did the regime issue any discriminatory policy on women's work comparable to that implemented in nazi Germany before 1936.<sup>6</sup> Legislation to exclude women from paid employment arrived late and remained relatively hesitant.<sup>7</sup> The lack of any decisive government intervention seems to be a reflection of the fact that there was little need for formal injunctions. The dictatorship had no cause to promulgate official measures when its economic policies did its bidding by accentuating the structural inequalities in the Italian labour market.

The long-term process of economic development in Italy caused a progressive decrease in women's participation in manual employments. From 45.3 percent of the total workforce engaged in industrial labour in 1881, the percentage of female operatives fell to 30.7 percent in 1911, 27.1 percent in 1921, and 25.6 percent in 1931.<sup>8</sup> The absolute numbers of women factory workers also declined steadily during this period.<sup>9</sup> Given continuous population growth from 1881 to 1931, the contraction of women's economic opportunities appears especially dramatic.<sup>10</sup> But the immediate contribution which fascist economic policy made to this trend is by no means clear. Because statistics compiled in the censuses of 1921, 1927, 1931, 1936, and 1937-1940 vary enormously by category investigated and results obtained, an accurate picture of the impact of fascism is difficult to reconstruct.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, distinct patterns do emerge from this data.

The regime offered women equal pay for equal work, though most female factory labourers in Italy were segregated in separate occupations. Census reports give some indication of the structure

of the female labour force. The pattern which emerges is one characterised by the overwhelming concentration of women workers in a few branches of the economy. With a predominantly female workforce, textile manufacture employed far more women than any other industry. The 1901 census counted 367,000 women involved in the production of silk, cotton, wool, and linen fabrics and 249,000 women involved in the plaiting of rough materials from straw, agave, and the like. In the clothing and related industries, women also predominated over men. Just over 150,000 women worked as seamstresses in the garment trade, while 73,000 needleworkers made specialised goods like hats, ties, shoes, and lingerie. Another important sector of female labour comprised servants, a category including workers in private homes and commercial establishments, who numbered 400,000 women in 1901. Over 30,000 more listed their employment as ironers and washwomen. Apart from these pursuits in factories and service industries, women also engaged in domestic manufacture on a large scale. The 1901 census estimated that 69,722 women spun and sewed at home.<sup>12</sup>

Women's representation in non-manual employments, by contrast, remained minimal. But like their counterparts in industry, women in these occupations tended to be concentrated in the lowest-paid jobs. Middle-class women were effectively excluded from most prestigious professions because of educational, legal and social discrimination. The nation had only 47 women doctors and dentists in 1901, and no women lawyers, architects, notaries, accountants, or engineers. In the careers opening to them, like teaching and nursing, women were doing much better, though their numbers were low compared to other European countries. A large proportion of women still entered the exclusively female profession of midwifery, but this category was declining. Only 661 women held secure positions in public administration, but the numbers of female telephonists and telegraphists were rising. An important sector of female salaried work comprised shop attendants who numbered over 160,000 women in 1901. And the Catholic Church provided 40,251 women with vocational and training opportunities.<sup>13</sup>

While relatively few women held better paid jobs, most were engaged in "traditional" female occupations which were unprotected, unorganised, and insecure. One of the peculiarities of the Italian economy was the numerical preponderance of small firms and artisanal enterprises over large factories. As late as 1937, 78.7 percent of all

Italian firms employed fewer than 50 to 100 workers, the figures which qualified them to be listed as "industrial" concerns. The clothing industry, for example, counted 169,000 firms in 1937; but only 2,600 of these were industrial, while the overwhelming majority employed fewer than five workers. In textiles, where women now comprised 75.6 percent of the labour force, 430,000 women worked in factories and just under 30,000 in shops in 1937.<sup>14</sup>

The 1937-1940 census confirmed that the number of small shops in clothing and textiles had risen during the fascist period. But the regime had done almost nothing to improve the conditions of homeworkers.<sup>15</sup> As women were expelled from the labour force, because of the economic crisis and rationalisation, they became increasingly ghettoised in the least modern sectors of industry. But the number of these women workers who toiled under sweated conditions for piece-rate wages evaded official tabulations. Italian censuses do not reflect the distinct pattern of women's employment either. As a category in official statistics, women workers refer only to those engaged in some form of regular and contractual employment. The structural imbalances of Italian industry though made women's work casual and shifting. The 1901 figure for homeworkers, for example, underestimates by a wide margin the number of women involved in a variety of crafts. The 1936 results show that 48,406 women engaged in homework in clothing and furnishings, while 8,930 engaged in domestic textile work. But as the census was completed in the spring, when homework declined in importance, the results are wholly inaccurate.<sup>16</sup> By giving a static picture of the labour force, the censuses do not capture the changing rhythms of women's involvement in paid work. Because of the seasonal nature of textile production, and the high turnover in the labour force from one year to the next, many women mixed factory work with farm and domestic by-employments. Bouts of unemployment and underemployment regularly punctuated a woman's working life.

The structure of the female labour force underwent changes during the fascist period. The immediate impact of the economic crisis was disastrous for female factory labour as over one million women lost jobs between 1927 and 1932.<sup>17</sup> This short-term effect was accompanied by two other important trends which have a direct bearing on the question of whether welfare, and in this case programmes aimed at mothers, could offset material losses. Women workers were declining in age



during the dictatorship, although the weaknesses of census reports make cross-comparisons difficult. By 1936, the average woman worker was aged between 15 and 24 years of age.<sup>19</sup> Historians have noted that employers in artificial textiles were trend-setters with regard to company welfare schemes.<sup>19</sup> While this industry employed only 11,499 women in 1937, the vast majority of these were minors.<sup>20</sup> When the Baron Alberto Fassini Camossi opened the nursery at his rayon works in 1927, ONMI lavished attention on this industrialist who seemed to be taking the regime's female labour policy seriously. Employing more than 2,000 women at the Prenestina plant in Rome, the Baron also provided worker housing in the form of dormitories on the large industrial estate. But over 85 percent of his female labour force were under the age of 18, a fact which made the day care centre a bit of an irrelevance.<sup>21</sup>

The attachment of married women to work outside the home seemed to be declining during the dictatorship. The proportion of married women to the total female industrial workforce dropped from 41.3 percent in 1927 to 22 percent in 1931, then rose slightly to 23.5 percent by 1936.<sup>22</sup> Married women were not leaving factories for more comfortable jobs in offices, as here too the majority of Italy's growing female white-collar labour force were young and single.<sup>23</sup> They left the workforce to become "attendenti di casa", a category which rose by 2 million in the years 1921 to 1931, or they became part of the increasing number of so-called housewives who participated in part-time and irregular homework.<sup>24</sup> The expulsion of married women from the official labour force, together with men's feeble earnings, boded ill for many working families who were dependent on a dual income for survival. Other families would feel the worse effects of women's segregation in impoverishing occupations. Demographic trends revealed that the number of families with a woman as the primary breadwinner had increased by over 14 percent from 1921 to 1931. Over a million and a half of the nation's 9 million families were headed by a woman in 1931.<sup>25</sup>

These trends did not go unnoticed by contemporaries. Many observers believed that the regime's failure to bring the Italian economy out of crisis jeopardised population policy. By the middle of the 1930s, desperate pleas for government action to salvage the campaign became more vocal. Some wanted the state to intervene more directly by enacting legislation to prohibit women from work outside the home.

This new more militant attitude towards women workers reflected widespread recognition that fascism had not guaranteed working families a decent wage or regular employment. In response to the weaknesses of the economy, many felt the state should do more to protect male workers. In an article published in 1936, Ernesto De Marzio criticised the regime for having focused too much energy on fertility incentive schemes like family allowances. Even if they were extended to all workers in industry and agriculture, he argued, they would never be a substantial enough encouragement for parents to increase the size of their families. Poverty, bad housing and low living standards in fascist Italy, he stressed, proved too powerful an obstacle to birthrate increase for meagre tax deductions to redress. Since the regime seemed reluctant to hazard potentially unpopular moves to restrict female employment, he asserted, it should follow an indirect policy of discrimination. All women should be denied access to education which was not compatible with the exercise of their maternal and wifely duties. Only those without children should be allowed to work outside the home, but they should be restricted to "feminine" occupations in charity and social work.<sup>26</sup>

Not all fascist commentators agreed with these views. Daisy di Robilant gave a lively riposte to De Marzio by stating that his opinions conflicted with the aims of population policy. Denying women education, she believed, would have negative "eugenic" repercussions on their mothering skills. If De Marzio had his way, she argued, Italian progeny would be raised by "ignorant and incompetent *fatrici*" who had no understanding of the science of childrearing. To improve the quality of the nation's offspring, she stressed, the regime should try harder to fulfill the promises outlined in the Labour Charter. The regime had made a formal sacrifice of women workers, she asserted, in order to hide the structural unemployment which its economic policies had created. Women workers, she felt, had suffered a loss in earnings, job security, and economic opportunities under fascism. If women were accorded their statutory rights and were allowed to earn a living wage, she argued, they would be able to contribute more to the family income and improve the level of domestic comfort. It was no use teaching women how to be mothers, she pointed out, unless the regime assured all workers would have sufficient means to provide for their children's livelihood.<sup>27</sup>

By the end of the decade, the regime poised to make a last-ditch effort at reducing male unemployment. A new law promulgated in September 1938 aimed to hit women workers hard by setting up a 10 percent quota on their employment in public and private enterprises and a ban on their hiring in white-collar jobs in small firms.<sup>28</sup> Fascism, one enthusiastic observer remarked, had finally begun to "protect the manly and virile Italian economy from female invasion". The law defined what jobs were "feminine", and even though many of these involved hard labour or health risks, Fernando Loffredo commented, none of them threatened the "natural sexual division of the economy".<sup>29</sup>

#### *New Institutions of Welfare: Clinics and Kitchens*

The aims of ONMI policy were confined to minimising the effects of poverty through welfare. The objectives were to reduce infant and maternal mortality in Italy. The wider ambition of this programme, as an official publication revealed, was "to gain the adhesion of the masses to the regime's birthrate campaign". This could be done "only when the Italian people come to have faith in the ability of the state to care for families".<sup>30</sup> To fulfill these goals the organisation focused resources on developing new institutions for the medical, social, and economic assistance of needy mothers.

The 1926 regulation defined maternal and paediatric clinics as the main institutional link between ONMI and mothers. Designed to function as a form of community health centre, they were meant to attract clients early in their first pregnancy and to provide continuous assistance for the duration of their reproductive years. With regard to infants, clinics were conceived not just as *ambulatori* where sick babies could be brought, but also as observation centres for the practice of preventive medicine. The primary goal was to assure that babies from poor families had access to weekly medical examinations in order to monitor diets and growth, to reduce levels of rickets and malnutrition, and to persuade as many mothers as possible to breast-feed. Medical experts were to instruct mothers on the proper care and feeding of infants, to insure that mothers were well-fed enough to nurse, and to supervise the weaning process.<sup>31</sup>

Recognition of the mother's need to adequate nourishment led to the development of plans for two forms of "maternal aid", mothers' kitchens and food parcels. Officials defined kitchens as the preferred

type of assistance as mothers alone benefited from free meals. Food parcels, on the other hand, could be taken home to feed the whole family, thereby undermining the main objective which was to improve the mother's ability to breast-feed.<sup>32</sup>

According to ONMI's statutes and policy, clinics were to be directed by medical specialists in obstetrics, gynaecology, and paediatrics. Although they were not meant to be fully equipped with operating theatres, clinics, officials felt, could only run properly if medical personnel were qualified experts. In addition, clinics were seen as the institutional base for the development of new types of professionals in social work and medical care. The organisation aimed to provide general practitioners and midwives with training in puericulture to qualify them for jobs as supplementary staff in ONMI institutions. Approved by the central committee in June 1926, a course curriculum and trial scheme for these *assistenti* was distributed to the leaders of the nation's institutions of higher learning for their approval. By 1928, 16 universities across the nation participated in the programme by running courses at their own expense. By the end of that year 625 doctors and 240 midwives had received diplomas after the successful completion of the six-week course.<sup>33</sup>

ONMI failed to maintain the momentum of the training scheme. The following year, Blanc decided to run only one course for doctors which was based at the university in Rome. In 1933, the national leadership organised two traineeships for *assistenti* in Rome and in Milan which certified 52 nurses. Thereafter, the organisation dropped the initiative entirely from its reform programme for lack of high enrollments.<sup>34</sup> Part of the problem of the unpopularity of the recruitment effort was due to the fact that ONMI did not develop a workable plan for the employment of medical and social staff. According to the founding statutes, all ONMI personnel who worked in the organisation's own institutions were volunteers who offered their services free of charge.<sup>35</sup> This policy conflicted with the aim of creating a permanent network of medical services throughout the nation. As few Italian doctors received any specialised training in new disciplines like paediatrics, ONMI would have to make a considerable investment of resources in education. But unless the organisation could attract recruits through financial and career incentives, any attempt at forging a new administrative class of

welfare experts was doomed from the start.

Because of this huge shortcoming, the organisation experienced great difficulty enlisting the support of the medical profession. Members of the specialist societies for gynaecology, obstetrics and paediatrics, who were all university professors and distinguished practitioners, gave their full endorsement to the work of ONMI out of a sense of mission. But the Italian Ordine dei Medici and the Sindacato Nazionale dei Medici Fascisti not only withheld their backing but also lodged a formal complaint against the national leadership. Brought to the attention of Mussolini in March 1928 and at least on one other occasion in March 1933, the dispute arose over the question of whether the nation's 8,000 *medici condotti*<sup>36</sup> were legally bound to cooperate with ONMI. The issue of pay figured as the most pressing matter in the controversy, but general practitioners on the public payroll also expressed other grievances. They resented having to work for an organisation which undermined their importance to the demographic campaign.

The attitude of eugenicists and specialists came out clearly in public addresses to the medical community. At a gathering of *medici condotti* in Rome in 1930, Cesare Micheli gave a lecture on the role of the "old breed of *condotta*" in the fascist welfare revolution. A surgeon at Rome's City Hospital and the director of the San Giovanni Maternity Hospital, Micheli also held a chair in gynaecology at the University. A member of the national commission appointed by Mussolini in 1926 to propose legislation to stop the spread of "malthusianism", Micheli, along with other eugenicists, like the senator and obstetrician Ernesto Pestalozza, had been instrumental in formulating the infamous June 1927 act, the public security act of November 1927, and the act of 16 January 1929, which set more severe penalties against abortion and contraception.<sup>37</sup> As an ONMI leader, Micheli also lobbied government to consider promulgating a law requiring all poor women to register with ONMI and municipal authorities when they became pregnant. Had it been successful, the enactment would have introduced substantial modifications to the national *guardia ostetrica* system instituted in 1907 under Pestalozza's influence. Under the proposed guidelines for the "denuncia di gravidanza", any woman who failed to present herself for a medical evaluation early in her pregnancy would no longer be entitled to have a municipal midwife present at her

birth.<sup>38</sup> A fanatical and arrogant ONMI enthusiast who believed he had a moral duty to bring "Italian mothers out of their ignorance", Micheli saw *medici condotti* as underlings in this struggle. In his 1930 talk, he stated that "the obstetrician, gynaecologist, and paediatrician rule over the domain of ONMI clinics while general practitioners are called up by fascism to follow the lead and command of specialists".<sup>39</sup> And in his paper given at the 28th Congress of the Italian Obstetrics and Gynaecology Society in 1930, Micheli bemoaned the fact that there were not enough specialists to run clinics in Italy. The nation's *condotti*, he lamented, did not know how to practice eugenic medicine, and were little better able to supervise the rearing of infants than were Italy's mothers.<sup>40</sup>

This sort of attitude did not endear ONMI's experts to the wider medical community. Doctors' complaints of ill-treatment by the organisation's consultant specialists reached ONMI administrators. In one such case in the small *borgo* of Monte Mario in Rome, a local doctor working for the commune ran the clinic opened there by ONMI in 1931. Assisted by a nurse also paid by the municipality, he saw 50 infants and their mothers on average each of the three days a week he devoted to ONMI work. According to the procedure adopted by Rome's *comitato*, a visiting specialist arrived once a week to hold special consultations and to review the case load. When the paediatrician from town failed to show up for two weeks' running, the doctor asked ONMI officials to explain his absence. The *condotta* had been forced to refer some children he suspected were showing signs of tuberculosis to the nearest hospital in a neighboring commune, and complained of the delay this caused in their treatment. When the paediatrician finally arrived one morning, an argument ensued because the visiting consultant refused to stay for longer than two hours, his prescribed schedule. ONMI leaders sent out an inspector to investigate the matter. In his report, the inspector stated that in normal circumstances he would advocate an official reprimand against the *condotta* for disciplinary reasons, but that in this case no action should be taken because the doctor was running the clinic in an exceptionally conscientious manner.<sup>41</sup>

Doctors were not the only ones who had cause for grievance. ONMI did not offer pay to any of its clinic staff. And when these people could not at least fall back on salaries from municipal government,

they found themselves in the unenviable position of doing long hours for no recompense and little recognition. In 1939, a letter arrived at Mussolini's desk sent by a nurse from the commune of Aquillara Sabazia in the province of Rome. She described herself as a widow who lived off her "miserable" pension of 3 *lire* a day, less than a third of what an unskilled male factory worker earned in a daily wage, and less than half what a female operative made. When she retired in 1929, she began working in an ONMI clinic doing volunteer work both as "the doctors' assistant and as the housekeeper", but had never received any reward for her "service to the nation". Only after ten years had she unsuccessfully attempted to ask the federation for "a little something". In her letter, she cautiously stated that the ONMI federation in Rome had seen fit to grant the doctors sharing clinic routine a Christmas bonus every year as a gesture of their gratitude.<sup>42</sup>

The nurse did not mention the circumstances surrounding her pension allowance. But evidence suggests that social insurance claims by women workers covered by the *Istituto Nazionale Fascista della Previdenza Sociale* were determined on the basis of their reproductive performance. In assessing female claimants, authorities in Novara inquired about the number of a woman's offspring, and used this information as a factor in deciding whether to grant a pension, a sickness benefit, or a retirement bonus. Regardless of the number of years a woman had worked, prolificity was seen to be a more important criterion of entitlement. And the more prolific a mother was, the larger the award she received. In one case, an old widowed woman with no other means of support was judged "unworthy" of a pension because she had given birth to only one child.<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps reflecting wider attitudes, ONMI certainly took for granted that women would perform selfless service in aid of the fascist welfare revolution. But the voluntary nature of state employment certainly worked at crosspurposes with the organisation's objectives. In one instance, national leaders were forced to dismantle an entire programme because they could not find enough doctors to organise the effort. In late 1926, national leaders decided to implement a policy for *cattedre ambulanti*, or "visiting instruction centres for the dissemination of the scientific principles of child nurture". Although not solely targeted at the South and islands, the scheme aimed to compensate for the deficiency of welfare institutions

in backward regions by establishing mobile units equipped with "sanitary officers". Each *cattedra* was meant to cover an area no larger than about 20 communes in one day, to set up an open clinic in a public or party building, and to receive women for training sessions in puericulture. ONMI leaders negotiated the itinerary in advance with district doctors and midwives, and asked them to encourage their clientele to attend. The national leadership claimed to have established 7 such travelling centres in 1927, 11 more in 1928, and 33 more in 1929, all of which were located mainly in the deep South and eastern Sicily. The *cattedra* opened in Rome's Campagna region on reclaimed swamp land was used by ONMI and the regime as a "model institution" to impress foreign governments and the League of Nations who sent dignitaries to inspect "one of the greatest victories of fascism".<sup>44</sup>

In reality, however, the policy was a complete disaster from the start principally because ONMI authorities found public doctors and midwives refused to co-operate with their efforts. Another reason for the failure, provincial federations in rural areas complained that they preferred to administer aid to the needy rather than divert scarce funds into a mass propaganda initiative. All mention of the *cattedre ambulanti* scheme disappeared from ONMI publications after 1930, and in 1933 the national leadership officially terminated the programme.<sup>45</sup>

In contrast to the mobile units, the development of clinics proceeded apace. By 1929, ONMI had opened 82 mixed maternal and infant clinics, mainly in northern and central regions, though none yet qualified to be called an integrated *Casa della Madre e del Bambino*. The number of women and children who had attended a clinic exceeded 60,000 by 1929, according to official statistics.<sup>46</sup> In 1930, 120 clinics functioned, but only about 30 of these provided any form of medical care such as testing for tuberculosis or the distribution of minor medicines. The majority functioned as centres where women collected free foods, like bread and olive oil, and packets of dried milk.<sup>47</sup> ONMI also reported that as many as 92,000 women nationwide had been fed in mothers' kitchens during the years 1927 to 1930. By 1938, the nation possessed 3,500 maternal clinics, 4,400 infant clinics, 1,300 kitchens, and 190 complete *Casa della Madre e del Bambino*.<sup>48</sup>

But the actual success of this programme must be assessed through



consideration of the substance of assistance women received in these institutions. Firstly, clinics did implement a restrictive policy in order to minimise costs. Although a clear contravention of the 1926 statutes, women were required to present a municipal *tessera di povertà* as a condition of admittance. And potential candidates had to be interviewed beforehand by ONMI communal authorities, be inscribed in the organisation's registers, and be referred in writing to the clinic directors. Secondly, the clinics only accepted children under the age of six as patients. The principal competence of clinics was to supervise the *allevamento del lattante* rather than care for medical problems. And thirdly, when a woman was given a prescription at the clinic, she then had to go to the municipal poor office to have her request for free medicines and remedies validated. In rural areas, the local *medico condotto* generally ran clinics, so women did not need to undergo the inconvenience of sorting out excessive bureaucratic formalities. But ONMI consultants often presided over clinics in big cities, and they were not empowered to authorise free-drug claims.<sup>49</sup>

Perhaps the greatest shortcoming, however, was that clinics were created as the institutional vehicle for an "opera di persuasione su la massa della popolazione" to elevate standards of childrearing in Italy.<sup>50</sup> The director's attention focused on convincing his clients to breast-feed their babies. And his success rate comprised the prime measure by which ONMI inspectors judged the functioning of a clinic. In Rome, an official ONMI inquest conducted in 1932 revealed that 96 percent of the women who frequented the 12 clinics throughout the province nursed their babies. The organisation's leaders took credit for this achievement and determined to continue in their struggle to disseminate "scientific norms for motherhood".<sup>51</sup>

Because of financial constraints, breast-feeding was made a condition of assistance in clinics. To waive this requirement, a woman had to present a medical certificate to clinic staff confirming that she was unable to nurse her child. The attending doctor in the clinic would then examine her breasts and send her to a local *dispensario antituberculare* to be tested for tuberculosis and syphilis. If she tested positive for either disease, the mother was given a choice between sending her child out to wetnurse for a period of six to eight months, or using the milk and baby formula supplied free of charge by the clinic. There were a number of problems with this method of deter-

mining qualification for benefits. Outside of large cities, clinic authorities in great part had trouble organising the purchase of fresh cow's milk with which the formula was mixed. And many could not afford to pay commercial manufacturers for bulk supplies of the more expensive type of ready-made formula. As a consequence, clinics distributed a powdered variety to clients who themselves were too poor to buy and store their own fresh milk, even if they could find it readily available in shops. Another drawback, clinic directors were suspicious of mothers who declined to breast-feed. They felt that many women paid private doctors to write out false medical certificates and that they used the clinics to acquire free food hand-outs. Women, on the other hand, did complain to ONMI *comitati* that doctors made them feel guilty about being somehow inadequate if they did not produce enough milk to nurse or if they could not afford "artificial" substitutes.<sup>52</sup> Meeting eugenic specifications for the proper and scientific rearing of infants seemed to be far beyond the budget of many mothers.

Conflicts arose out of resentment over the way doctors treated women. In one case, a woman from a small commune outside of Rome went to the ONMI *comitato* to complain about the *condotto* who ran the local clinic. The doctor, a secretary of the neighborhood *fascio*, behaved as if he were "God on earth", according to the woman. When she stopped lactating suddenly four months after the birth of her first child, she went to the clinic in a panic to ask for some farina and formula for her infant. The doctor refused to give her any on the grounds that she was young and healthy enough to nurse her infant. She was forced to beg for food from other mothers at the clinic. In her testimony, which passed to the provincial federation, she accused the doctor of distributing the packets only to local women whose husbands were members of the fascist party. And she charged that the midwife who was affiliated to the clinic had actually sold some of the formula to regular clients at a rate just below the commercial price. Because of the poverty and unemployment in the district, she concluded, many women had been forced to pay 3 *lire* a box for food which should have been given to them free of charge.<sup>53</sup>

Whether or not the woman had embellished her story is less important than the fact that the narrative illustrates that the regime had certainly succeeded in making some people at least feel they deserved state benefits, but that this new conception could become a source of

resentment if ONMI failed to live up to rising expectations of public responsibility for welfare. The charge of corruption did, however, have a basis in fact. The *condotto* system under fascism had undergone changes as party secretariats gained control of public appointments. PNF membership, preferably dating back to the early days of the struggle for power, became a mandatory application requirement, as did close ties to the local hierarchy. In 1935, rumblings about favouritism and declining employment qualifications reached the national PNF secretary, Achille Starace, who then instigated an investigation into hiring procedure. The inquiry conducted in the province of Milan by the prefect's office revealed that local mayors and party officials practiced a policy of *scavalco* by which they bypassed regulations about open competitions and recruited their friends instead.<sup>54</sup>

The political outlook of ONMI leaders also marred the work of welfare. Official reports from ONMI's Milanese *federali* to the national leadership were full of florid references to the achievements of the organisation. Thanks to the generosity of government and élites, the federation had managed to complete a substantial portion of its five-year plan for the "civilising penetration of the people" by creating 28 mothers' kitchens and 5 clinics by 1928. Much of the success of the programme was due to the "inspired leadership" of Milan's city *comitato* who carried on a "tireless effort to correct the astounding ignorance and carelessness of mothers through instruction and assistance".<sup>55</sup> However, the attempt to bring mothers within the protective arms of the state did not entirely succeed in Milan, mainly because women showed hostility towards initiatives to educate them. Initial anger amongst ONMI clientele at the clinic located in the capital built up over the limited and inconvenient hours of the service. For two days a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays, the clinic opened for two-hour morning sessions. Because doctors often arrived late, women had to wait a long time. They complained about missing their free lunches at the mothers' *mensa*, which was run on a strict schedule and was some distance away. Many worked and could not risk losing their jobs. But when violence finally broke out at the clinic in November 1931, the "shouts and screams of protest" were all targeted at the ONMI official who supervised the reception room. Local women smashed her desk to pieces, and stormed out of the office, vowing never to return again. Because of her "superior and condescend-

ing attitude to women of the popular classes", a subsequent prefect's investigation revealed, the member of the *fascio femminile* who volunteered her services as a doctor's assistant had managed to "alienate the people".<sup>56</sup>

Reports of women complaining about "not getting enough from the state" abounded in ONMI's official correspondence with prefects.<sup>57</sup> Provincial ONMI budgets for the kitchens were very tight, so directors kept meal portions small and daily quotas limited. Here again, conditional eligibility requirements came into effect in order to control costs. In addition to holding a certificate of poverty, a potential client had to be examined by a doctor in one of the clinics to qualify for the food plan. Only when she could present a medical statement showing she suffered from undernourishment or malnutrition could a woman be allowed entry.<sup>58</sup> Despite these constraints, however, the free lunch programme provided a vital social service for the community. By recognising at least that poverty and unemployment existed in Italy and caused significant health risks, the policy on kitchens, whatever its ideological motivation, had the potential to improve the quality of life of many people under the dictatorship.

ONMI leaders in poor communes had trouble organising this service. In one such case in Rome's Valle dell'Inferno, a region of high infant mortality and female fertility, the municipal leadership made repeated requests to the federation for a special emergency grant to pay for the building and maintenance costs of a kitchen. This suburb of Rome was also the province's main wetnursing centre of the farming-out trade conducted by foundling home authorities. After eight years of trying, the local patron of ONMI wrote an angry letter to *federali* explaining that in an area of chronic male unemployment where women worked the fields, and suffered a high rate of miscarriage as a result, a public cafeteria for families would help to alleviate "a great deal of misery".<sup>59</sup> In another example, kitchen staff bended rules in order to provide a substantive service. An inspection carried out in one kitchen run by nuns raised suspicions about management corruption. When brought before ONMI authorities on charges of food theft, the sisters admitted that they had been lying about the numbers of women and children who regularly attended. The nuns wanted to offer their clients enough food to last them a whole day, and to give them small parcels to take home to their husbands. The federation decided

to introduce an "assiduous and rigorous system of accounting and control" in order to prohibit this sort of "irregularity" from happening again in the future.<sup>60</sup>

The qualitative evidence of the bureaucratic bungling, the financial constraints, and the institutional limitations which plague any large and underfunded organisation like ONMI is plenty. Inspectors' reports revealed that not all kitchens lived up to fascism's expectations for modern, hygienic, and efficient services. In one surprise visit, a refectory was found to be: "crowded with hungry women and screaming babies, some of whom are turned away at the door for lack of space and sufficient food; filled with an incredibly horrible odour and flies everywhere, even on plates; filthy and disordered". The simple fare which consisted of a stew and bread may have been without much taste, as the inspector noted, but the women "appeared grateful for what they got" nonetheless.<sup>61</sup>

Visits conducted by clinic authorities uncovered the fact that many clients brought up their babies in homes which were: "unfit for human habitation; unclean and unsafe; small; without running water and electricity". Notwithstanding "our active hygienic propaganda", visitors observed, mothers exhibited a "refractory mentality", and did not seem to understand that "such environments endangered the health of infants".<sup>62</sup> And in one refectory, directors announced they would no longer be giving out free food rations to cover the days when the kitchen was closed on holidays and Sundays. This economising measure met with "an outcry of discontent" by the 46 local women who regularly frequented the establishment. Forced to make a concession, the authorities now instituted a new policy which permitted mothers to come to the *mensa* on Sundays for their free meals. But this change caused more anger because women wanted to be with their families on the weekend. Confused about the appropriate course of action, the directors appealed to Mussolini for his help. The Duce pointed out to them that their new policy had not actually saved the organisation any money because of the extra administrative and running costs for the Sunday meals. The directors dutifully reverted to their original system.<sup>63</sup>

Of equal importance to the quality of service provided by these institutions is the question of the "mass" dimension of welfare. Official figures on the kitchens' programme claim that ONMI fed 61,858

women in 1933, 77,011 in 1934, and 84,502 in 1935. The clinics' *dispensari di latte* attended to the needs of 46,109 infants in 1933, 110,139 in 1934, and 144,855 in 1935. National statistics on the numbers "assisted" in ONMI clinics also show remarkable achievements: from 139,956 women in 1933, the annual total rose to 255,505 by 1935.<sup>64</sup> However impressive they may seem, these data do not reveal whether women received sporadic, minimal and discontinuous contact with fascist welfare or whether the regime actually "penetrated" the daily life of its people.

***The Regime's 'Ideological Hold' over Italian Women***

Because of problems of resources and personnel, the clinics and kitchens functioned as instruments for the distribution of propaganda literature by the regime and ONMI's experts. Especially as ONMI's own financial crisis worsened in the early 1930s, cutbacks adversely affected forms of direct economic aid like subsidies to mothers in need. Sileno Fabri shifted welfare even further away from economic and medical benefits by placing more emphasis in his directives to leaders on the less costly schemes for the "education of the masses". Although this bias had been written into ONMI's founding statutes, funding pressures forced provincial administrations to resign themselves to the fact that clinics would never become fully-fledged medical centres.

Clinics followed a policy of "social prophylaxis by reaching out to mothers" through popular publications aimed at improving the "hygiene of infancy and childhood". According to directives from national leaders, home visits consisted of "informal instruction by the ONMI volunteer on modern methods of childcare". And in clinics too, mothercraft lessons would be followed by the distribution of "scientific propaganda" explaining in simple diagrams, drawings and prose the regimen a mother should follow to safeguard her infant's development. In addition, policy statements stressed, women should be "gently persuaded" to appreciate the enormity of their task and the importance of their "maternal duty" to the national community. With the significant exception of food and milk parcels, the "social assistance" provided by clinics consisted almost entirely of this programme for the state modernisation and regimentation of motherhood.<sup>65</sup>

Distributed freely to all women who attended clinics and kitchens,

educational manuals adopted a patent moralising tone about the requisites of good mothering. In one such publication entitled *The Hygienic Home*, a physician advised women to be economical and efficient in household management. Overwhelmed at first after the birth of a baby, young mothers should learn early on to budget their time for chores, baby care and wifely duties. Asking himself whether working-class parents had the financial means to guarantee a healthy and happy home for children, he answered that the most important thing was "una buona volontà". Mothers, he advised, must use their good sense to organise family expenditure more prudently. Every year, he remarked, Italians spent between 8 and 9 billion *lire* on wine. If those on a tight budget eliminated alcohol entirely from shopping lists, he asserted, they would have more income to spend on their children.<sup>66</sup>

Other publications, like *The Maternity Book*, came complete with photos of mother and baby and madonna and child performing nurturant activities. As well as containing words of warning and advice to expectant mothers, each page had a caption with some of the more encouraging statements by the Duce, such as: "The whims of fashion are so deleterious to the race. The craze of women to lose weight is dangerous and threatening. If only women knew how men find motherhood enhances feminine beauty."<sup>67</sup> And others dealt with specific aspects of childrearing like the manual on baby bath-giving which mistakenly took as an implicit assumption that all working-class households were equipped with such amenities as running water and heat.<sup>68</sup>

Middle-class assumptions were also replete in official propaganda about the achievements of fascism. In his *A Home for the Masses and Fascist Ideology*, Antonio Lamaro claimed that the regime had elevated the labouring poor, who had been "morally retarded by socialism", into disciplined and industrious workers. The home, he affirmed, was the prime educational tool of a dictatorship which had proved to its people that even those who earn a slim wage were entitled to "enjoy the spiritual joys of family life, despite material dissatisfaction." The aim of fascism was not to obliterate class distinctions, but rather to improve the moral character of the *lavoratore delle braccia* so he would no longer feel socially inferior to the *lavoratore del cervello*. Even for those families whose incomes were compressed, the conveniences of the ideal home were indeed within reach. In the not

too distant future, he promised, fascism would realise its goal of constructing abundant public housing fit with running water, electricity, and other domestic comforts.<sup>69</sup>

Through publications like these, the state support of food aid and clinics imposed on women a fulsome assortment of the prejudices of welfare ideology. Eugenic calls for a civic training of mothers had become a reality through ONMI. But these manuals also expose a fundamental weakness of fascist provision. Despite repeated claims to the contrary, the regime expressed a clear preference for the chief responsibility for rearing healthy children to fall on women. Under fascism, the pressures placed on women as mothers, workers and consumers, however, were manifold and contradictory. On the one hand, the regime purported to have socially elevated motherhood. On the other hand, the regime presided over the disbarment of women from occupations which were other than irregular, casual and badly-paid. In essence, the regime made it exceedingly hard for women to fulfill the aims of population policy. Unless accompanied by a significant improvement in the living standards of working people, the advice literature on infant care simply had little relevance to most women. Pamphlets extolling the redeeming mission of mothers of the race contrasted too sharply with the daily realities of working-class life for the message to have had much persuasive force. The domestic ideals espoused in this educational propaganda must have given very little comfort indeed to women who struggled for family survival.

Perhaps the most compelling proof of the inadequacies of fascist welfare, maternal mortality levels did not fall during the dictatorship. The regime's experts recognised that much of the illness and death associated with pregnancy and childbirth was "preventable". Significant factors affecting deathrates included poverty, malnutrition, and the conditions of the home and work environment. While national levels of maternal mortality declined from 26 deaths per 10,000 births in 1887 to 23.6 in 1914, they rose to 27.1 during the war. They remained stationary at the wartime level throughout the fascist period. And as for infant deaths, general levels continued to decline, while prenatal and neonatal mortality experienced no reduction.<sup>70</sup>

The chief protagonists in fascism's battle for the birthrate have left some evidence of what they really wanted from the regime. On the



morning of 18 April 1928, police arrested a doctor in private practice in the town of Busto Arsizio outside Milan. A house search uncovered the paraphernalia of an abortionist, as well as two jars of fully-formed fetuses. Payment receipts found in the doctor's surgery contained the names of four women who were subsequently brought in for interrogation. All four admitted to having procured an abortion for 200 *lire*. Two women had decided to abort because they were unmarried, while the remaining two women did not wish to have any more children. Subsequent investigations revealed that at least one married woman aged 32 had recently died in hospital as a result of an infection due to an incomplete procedure. The four women were fined 500 *lire* each, and released in the "interests of public peace". Two of them faced an additional fine of 50 *lire* each for refusing to obey police authority while in custody.<sup>71</sup>

A few days later, a contingent of angry women arrived at town hall demanding the immediate and unconditional release of the doctor. The police who arrived at the scene described the women as a "threatening force who intended to liberate the doctor personally". Forcibly disbanded that day, over 100 women returned to hold an all-night vigil outside of police headquarters where the doctor was being detained. They carried *fasci di fiori* and sang while they waited. Agitated by this "offence to public decency", police officers arrested eight women on the spot for civil disobedience and dispersed the rest. What the police described as "a phenomenon of collective female solidarity" continued throughout the following two weeks. Groups of women regularly held public demonstrations and sent others to police headquarters with bunches of flowers for the doctor. On 5 May, the police decided to release the doctor on condition he leave town quietly under their escort. Under orders from their superiors, police in Busto Arsizio subsequently intensified vigilance to protect public order.<sup>72</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 P. Togliatti, *Lectures on Fascism* (New York, 1976), pp. 46; 48; 73; 144.
- 2 V. de Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, p. viii.
- 3 See C. Saracena, "La famiglia operaia sotto il fascismo", *Annali*, Feltrinelli, XX (1979-1980), pp. 189-321; D. Preti, "Per una storia sociale dell'Italia fascista: la tutela della salute nell'organizzazione dello stato corporativo" in *Salute e classi lavoratrici in Italia dall'unità al fascismo*, M. L. Betri, A. G. Marchetti, and F. Angeli, eds. (Milan, 1982) pp. 797-834. And see R. De Felice, *Interpretations of Fascism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1977), p. 12 for his view of welfare as a "social concession".
- 4 See especially, de Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, chs. 1 and 8.
- 5 C. Posta, *La donna operaia nello stato fascista*, I Quaderni delle Corporazioni, no. 14 (Rome, 1928) pp. 7-9; and G. Landi, *L'assistenza e previdenza sociale nell'ordinamento corporativo fascista* (Ferrara, 1932), pp. 56-59 on "solidarietà e collaborazione". And on the Charter of Labour, see R. De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista: L'organizzazione dello stato fascista*, II (Turin, 1968), pp. 222-96; appendix, 542-47.
- 6 T. Mason, "Women in Nazi Germany", part 1, and "Women in Germany, 1925-1940: Family, Welfare and Work", part 2, in *History Workshop*, nos. 1 and 2 (1976), pp. 74-113; and 5-31.
- 7 E. P. Noether, "Italian Women and Fascism: A Revaluation", *Italian Quarterly*, XXIII (Fall, 1982), p. 73 on the enactments.
- 8 See G. Tagliacarne, "L'occupazione delle donne nelle fabbriche e negli uffici durante gli ultimi cinquant'anni e la diminuzione delle nascite" *Giornale degli Economisti*, XLIX (December, 1934), pp. 927-40.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 929.
- 10 ISTAT, *Cento anni di sviluppo economico e sociale dell'Italia, 1861-1961* (Rome, 1961), table on p. 57.
- 11 See F. P. Bortolotti, "Osservazioni sull'occupazione femminile durante il fascismo", *Sul movimento politico delle donne: Scritti inediti*, A. Buttafuoco, ed. (Rome, 1987), pp. 179-207.
- 12 Min. AIC, *Censimento della popolazione del Regno d'Italia: Febbraio 1901*, III (Rome, 1904). pp. 16-23; and IV (Rome, 1904), pp. 188-89.
- 13 *Ibid.*, III, pp. 28-31.
- 14 ISTAT, *Censimento industriale e commerciale, 1937-1940*, Prima parte: Risultati generali, I (Rome, 1942), pp. 16-17.

- 15 Ibid., p. 38.
- 16 Ibid., p. 29; and ISTAT, *VIII Censimento generale della popolazione, 21 Aprile 1936*, Parte seconda: Provincie, IV (Rome, 1939), pp. 215-16.
- 17 "Notiziario del lavoro e della previdenza", *Difesa Sociale*, XII (July, 1934), pp. 401-2.
- 18 *VIII Censimento generale della popolazione*, Parte prima: Professioni, IV (Rome, 1939), p. 31.
- 19 *The Culture of Consent*, pp. 67; 84-87.
- 20 *Censimento industriale e commerciale*, I, p. 38.
- 21 G. D'Ormeo, "Il nido della Società Generale Italiana della Viscosa", *MI*, II (February, 1927), pp. 40-47; and see B. Bianchi, "I tessili: lavoro, salute, conflitti" *Annali*, Feltrinelli, XX (1979/1980), pp. 973-1071.
- 22 ISTAT, *Compendio statistico Italiano*, XII (Rome, 1938), p. 107.
- 23 "Il Lavoro delle donne e una inchiesta Milanese", *MI*, XIII (July/October, 1938), pp. 389-90; *Censimento generale della popolazione*, Parte prima: Professioni, IV, p. 27.
- 24 *VIII Censimento generale della popolazione*, Parte seconda: Regno, IV (Rome, 1939), p. 237; and see, P. Meldini, *Sposa e madre esemplare, ideologia e politica della donna e della famiglia durante il fascismo*, (Rimini, 1975), p. 72.
- 25 ISTAT, *Annuario statistico*, I (Rome, 1927), pp. 28-29; *VIII Censimento generale della popolazione*, Parte Prima: Relazione, III (Rome, 1938), pp. 50-52.
- 26 E. De Marzio, "Il lavoro e la donna", *MI*, X (January/February, 1936), pp. 3-6; and on family allowances see Glass, *Population Policies*, pp. 248-55.
- 27 D. di Robilant, "Risposta ad un uomo", *MI*, X (May, 1936), pp. 7-8.
- 28 Noether, "Italian Women and Fascism", p. 73.
- 29 F. Loffredo, "Politica demografica e lavoro femminile", *Difesa Sociale*, XVII (October, 1938), pp. 994-97.
- 30 ONMI, *Istruzioni per il funzionamento dei consultori materni e pediatrici* (Rome, 1941), p. 8.
- 31 R. D. 15 April 1926, titolo 4, organizzazione e funzionamento dei servizi di protezione e assistenza, arts. 132-33.
- 32 A. Signa, *Il funzionamento del consultorio pediatrico dell'ONMI* (Rome, 1941), pp. 11-12.

- 33 *ONMI dalla sua fondazione*, pp. 67-72; Documenti ufficiali, "Preparazione del personale specializzato di puericoltura", *MI*, I (December, 1926), p. 58; P. Brusa, "Lo sviluppo dell'attività dell'ONMI nel 1928", *MI*, IV (May, 1929), pp. 491-530.
- 34 S. Fabbri, *Direttive e chiarimenti intorno allo spirito informatore della legislazione riguardante ONMI*, p. 20-22.
- 35 R. D. 15 April 1926, art. 134.
- 36 Bergamschi, *L'ONMI: Motivi e proposte di riforma*, p. 10; and ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1943, ONMI, b. 1261, f. 509817, letter from Blanc to Mussolini, 15 March 1928. And on the *medici condotti*, see A. Forti Messina, "I medici condotti all'indomani dell'unità" in *Salute e classi lavoratrici in Italia dall'unità al fascismo*, pp. 663-97.
- 37 See Micheli's personal file in ACS, PNF, SCN, b. 19, f. 332, which gives these career details; on Pestalozza, see the obituary in *Lucina: Organo del Sindacato Nazionale Fascista delle Ostetriche*, II, no. 1 (January, 1935), pp. 8-9. On the legislation against doctors who disseminated "malthusian" propaganda and devices, see F. P. Bortolotti, *Femminismo e partiti politici in Italia, 1919-1926* (Rome, 1978), p. 358; and on the law of 16 January 1929 on medical authorisation for "eugenic abortions", see C. Rubbiani, "La rubbrica della madre e del fanciullo", *MI*, IV (January, 1929), p. 67. In an interview which I conducted in Rome, a former ONMI leader told me that in 1938 Micheli faced trial under the charge of having performed illegal abortions. When the threat of a court case and scandal became known to him, Mussolini allegedly intervened personally to hush the matter. I have not been able to substantiate this however.
- 38 C. Micheli, *La denuncia della gravidanza* (Rome, 1929), pp. 12-14. Micheli also took part in the commission to reform the practice of midwifery, out of which emerged the new regulation severely limiting the right of midwives to intervene in birth. See ONMI, *Esercizio ostetrico delle levatrici: Regolamento, istruzione tecniche, relazione illustrativo, 17 Maggio 1930* (Rome, 1930), pp. 24-36.
- 39 C. Micheli, *I medici condotti e la protezione della madre nell'ONMI* (Rome, 1930), pp. 7-9.
- 40 C. Micheli, "XXVIII Congresso della Società Italiana di Ostetricia e Ginecologia", *MI*, V (January, 1930), pp. 59-76.
- 41 ACR, ASS, ispettorato dell'ONMI, f. 71114, sf. 1, report of Prof. Dott. Mario Acqua, dated 12 March 1938, accompanied by the letter of the consultant, Giovanni Carratelli.
- 42 IPAlI, lettere riservate, letter dated 12 January 1939, addressed to Mussolini, referred back to the Federation. I have not been allowed to record any of the names on these letters. Refer to the bibliography for an explanation of these sources.

- 43 ASN, P, I serie, cat. 7, b. 19, f. 5, pensione vecchiaia-infortuni sul lavoro; a group of letters by women referred to the mayor's office after review by the social security office; letter of 27 April 1938 cited.
- 44 A. Carelli, "Sei anni di attività dell'Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia", *MI*, VII (October, 1932), pp. 972-91.
- 45 Bergamaschi, *L'ONMI*, p. 7.
- 46 A. Lo Monaco-Aprile, "Lo spirito e il contenuto della legge fascista sulla protezione della maternità e dell'infanzia", *MI*, IV (February, 1929), pp. 155-66.
- 47 C. Micheli, "XXVIII Congresso", p. 63.
- 48 Carelli, "Sei anni di attività", see figures on pp. 978-80; *ONMI, Istituti e preventori* (Rome, 1950), p. 12-16; and *ONMI dalla sua fondazione*, p. 142.
- 49 Signa, *Il funzionamento del consultorio pediatrico*, p. 20.
- 50 F. Valagussa, "Relazione al XIV Congresso di pediatria tenutosi in Firenze nel Settembre 1931", *MI*, VI (October, 1931), pp. 1040-61.
- 51 Signa, *Il funzionamento del consultorio*, p. 10.
- 52 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 53 IPAlI, lettere riservate, letter from a woman living in the commune of San Gregorio, dated 6 September 1935, written by an ONMI worker who transcribed the testimony.
- 54 ASM, GP, cat. 42, Sanità, Consiglio Sanitario, b. 1035, one file on *levatrici*, and another on *medici condotti*, letter of Starace to prefect, 15 February 1935; and letter of PNF *federale* to the prefect, 21 November 1936.
- 55 S. Fabbri, *L'attività della federazione provinciale Milanese dell'ONMI durante il 1928*, pp. 40-42.
- 56 ASM, GP, cat. 12, ONMI, b. 378, report about the incident, 17 November 1931; and report about the functioning of clinics, 11 January 1933. For a similar situation, ACR, ASS, ispettorato dell'ONMI, f. 744, sf. 1, from *comitato* in Centocelle to Rome's *patronato*, 20 November 1935, a complaint about a doctor who never arrived before 11 in the morning, when the surgery opened at 8:30; and in the same holding, f. 724, sf. 1, a letter dated 21 March 1936 from zona Appio, Latino, Metronio about an outburst at one clinic which erupted when women were turned away at the door, after having waited for hours.
- 57 ACR, ASS, ispettorato dell'ONMI, f. 7181, Quadraro, segreteria-complexivo, see the relazione annuale, 1938.

- 58 ACR, ASS, ispettorato dell'ONMI, f. 724, sf. 1, zona Appio, Latino, Metronio, letter from the president of the *comitato* to the federation, 21 March 1936.
- 59 IPAIL, lettere riservate, letter from the local *presidente delegato* of 27 January 1935 to provincial federation.
- 60 Ibid., Comune di Ascoli, report of the incident by *comitato di patronato*, 31 July 1938.
- 61 ACR, ASS, ispettorato dell'ONMI, f. 755, sf. 1, zona Esquilino, Celio, report of 6 March 1936.
- 62 Ibid., f. 7181, Quadraro, segreteria-complexivo, breve relazione sull'attività del consultorio pediatrico, 10 February 1939.
- 63 ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1943, b. 493, f. 189.751, Roma-Comitato di Patronato dell'ONMI, report of the chiusure festive dei refettori materni, 1938.
- 64 G. A. Blanc, "L'Opera Nazionale per la Protezione della Maternità ed Infanzia nel suo primo quinquennio di vita" *Il Messaggero*, 19 December 1931; Tavola II in ISTAT, *Compendio statistico Italiano*, X (Rome, 1936), p. 199; and "Dati statistici", *Difesa Sociale*, XVII (February, 1938), pp. v-vi. And see G. Salvemini, *Under the Axe of Fascism* (New York, 1971), pp. 318-20, on the question of the reliability of fascist "official" statistics.
- 65 ONMI, *Istruzioni per il funzionamento dei consultori*, pp. 5-6; R. D. 15 April 1926, titolo 4, servizi di aiuto materno e di profilassi sanitaria e assistenza dell prima infanzia, arts. 134-36.
- 66 O. Palesa, *La casa igienica* (Rome, 1930), pp. 1-5.
- 67 P. Gaifami, *Il libro della maternità* (Rome, 1930), p. 7.
- 68 ONMI, *Istruzioni popolari alle madri sul modo di fare il bagno al bambino* (Rome, 1930), *passim*.
- 69 A. Lamaro, *La casa per le masse e l'ideologia fascista* (Milan, 1941), pp. 11; 14; 18-23; on the "rationalisation of housework", see also, M. Hildegard, "Per la razionalizzazione dell'economia domestica", *L'Organizzazione Scientifica del Lavoro*, II (October, 1927), pp. 411-16.
- 70 ISTAT, *Statistica delle cause di morte nell'anno 1935* (Rome, 1937), pp. 5; 31-33; *Statistica delle cause di morte nell'anno 1937* (Rome, 1937), pp. 46; "Statistiche", *MI*, XIII (July/October, 1938), pp. 385-86.
- 71 ASM, GP, Q, cat. 5, Moralità, b. 224, captain's letter dated 5 May 1928 to the Interior Ministry, direzione generale della pubblica sicurezza; and reply on 18 May 1928.

- 72 Ibid., richiesto di militi della M. V. S. N. per servizio di ordine pubblico, 12, 23 and 24 April 1928; captain's report to the prefect of 23 April 1928; letter from the questura to prefect 5 May 1928; biglietto of 23 July 1928. And for aggregate figures on the number and type of convictions for abortion, ISTAT, *L'azione promossa dal governo nazionale dell'incremento demografico e contro urbanesimo* (Rome, 1934), p. 42.

## Women Agricultural Workers and Welfare Provision: The 'battaglia del riso', 1927-1938

This chapter explores public provision for women agricultural workers. Reluctant to develop a coherent policy on women factory labourers, the regime, nonetheless, gave ONMI leaders a clear mandate to implement reforms affecting female rice workers. The national organisation launched a campaign in 1927 and intensified efforts to build social services in rice-producing provinces as the depression worsened. This chapter continues to address the question of the social and political impact of welfare under fascism.

### *Rural Women in Fascist Italy*

The Italian countryside experienced profound changes during the fascist period, many of which adversely affected women. The proportion of women within the rural labour force fell from well over 60 percent in 1881 to just over 35 percent in 1938.<sup>1</sup> The greatest drop occurred in the period 1921 to 1931, when the size of the female labour force shrank by over 50 percent from 3,116,885 to 1,582,503.<sup>2</sup> Although the number of male workers, a category which comprised peasant smallholders, tenant farmers, and landless labourers, decreased too as a consequence of fascist agrarian policy,<sup>3</sup> men shared much less in the process of disemployment. The male rural workforce reduced by a little over 9 percent from 7,085,124 in 1921 to 6,392,639 in 1931.<sup>4</sup>

Official statistics confirmed that the fascist regime's *politica salariale* of reduced wages, high unemployment, and limited consumption had a more disastrous impact on women workers than it did on men workers.<sup>5</sup> Female rural unemployment rose higher than that of men during the height of the agricultural crisis from 1927 to 1931, when fascist trade unions permitted employers to fire women and children and rehire men at lower wages. Women workers also failed to share in the trend towards partial re-employment in the period of stabilisation from 1932 to 1936.<sup>6</sup> In breakdowns of average daily diets, the calory intake of peasant women was far lower than that of any other category in the economically active population.<sup>7</sup> Disparities in the wages men and women received, even for the same work, grew wider during the depression, as agrarian capitalists throughout the North and Centre followed official policy to salvage male pay packets at the expense of women and children. Less than half those of men at the peak of the



agricultural crisis, the average monthly earnings of female casual labourers continued to fall by a larger percentage than did those of men from 1931 to 1936.<sup>8</sup>

The deterioration in the income and living standards of women agricultural workers must be set against patterns of female fertility. The 1928 inquest into the geographic distribution of large families, conducted by ISTAT during the presidency of Corrado Gini, showed that the burden of child upkeep fell more heavily upon rural than urban parents. Out of Italy's nine million families, over one and a half million were comprised of seven or more child dependents, and almost half a million households had at least ten children who lived at home. Concentrated in rural Italy, the nation's most prolific families had produced almost half of the total population of just under 17 million children. And the poorest regions in the *mezzogiorno*, Apulia, Basilicata, and the Abruzzi had the highest density of big families in the nation.<sup>9</sup>

While almost 20 percent of urban working-class mothers who completed their childbearing years in the 1920s had given birth to at least seven live children, just under 25 percent of peasant women had produced the same number of offspring.<sup>10</sup> The demographic census results of 1931 revealed marked social class variations in family size. The average middle-class household contained three children; that of industrial workers five; that of the lower middle class of artisans, shopkeepers, and merchants five; that of white-collar employees in services and administration three; and that of agricultural labourers six.<sup>11</sup>

And other studies showed that rural women began to have children at an earlier age than did urban women and prolonged their fertility well into middle-age.<sup>12</sup> While demographic statistics on rural women are fairly reliable, those on employment patterns are not. Female agricultural workers, according to censuses, were a disparate group which comprised small proprietors, renters, peasants on fixed contracts, leaseholders, casual day labourers, and sharecroppers. Because of the relatively high proportion of widows amongst the agricultural population, and the nature of the rural household economy, women took an active part in family farm work, a fact which is not fully reflected in census reports. In a small minority in all other rural occupations, women predominated over men in the category

of *usufruttuari*, those intermediate strata of peasants who held inheritable farming rights to land they did not own.<sup>13</sup> By far the largest percentage of economically active rural women were engaged in intermittent and seasonal field work in corn, flax, wheat, olive and rice cultivation which provided fewer than 50 days of regular employment a year. Many of these came from sharecropping families, and especially from the *compartecipanti* in Lombardy, the Veneto, and Emilia who enjoyed less profitable contracts than traditional *mezzadri*.<sup>14</sup>

The number of rural "housewives" rose considerably during the fascist period.<sup>15</sup> But many of these rural *massaie* mixed field work on family allotments with various forms of home manufacture of foodstuffs and finished goods. Sericulture flourished everywhere middling tenantry proliferated and sharecropping women predominated amongst the *bacinelle* who tended worms and wound the thread.<sup>16</sup> Hit badly by the agricultural depression after 1925, small-time silk spinning failed to recover.<sup>17</sup> The rise of the corporate conglomerates in artificial fibres in the following decade eclipsed this sector, but failed to absorb the surplus of women left out of work as some traditional industries declined.<sup>18</sup>

The fascist government's response to female rural unemployment centred on the organisation of women into the party's housewives' association. Founded on 28 September 1934, the federation of *Massaie Rurali* became recognised soon after as a separate section of provincial party organisations subordinate to the *fasci femminili*.<sup>19</sup> Funded primarily by contributions from agricultural labour syndicates, and the annual collection of dues from its own members, the association aimed to "educate" women in the skills of garden cultivation, animal husbandry, home crafts, and all those *piccole industrie casalinghe* which formed an important component in rural household economy.<sup>20</sup> With a membership of 571,658 in 1934 which grew to 1,242,514 by 1939, the association drew strength mostly from sharecropping and peasant landowning families.<sup>21</sup> The regime attempted to use the *Massaie Rurali* as a vehicle for mass propaganda to monitor discontent and to mobilise support for the colonial campaign in 1935 and the war effort after 1940. An important part of the rural organisation of housewives consisted of the development of co-operative farms on reclaimed land. On *Massaie Rurali* estates outside

Rome, for example, women produced fruit and vegetables for ONMI kitchens.<sup>22</sup>

The regime carried out a plan to recruit female labour for a patriotic venture organised around small workshops catering primarily to the party's demand for paramilitary paraphernalia. Together with the *fasci femminili*, and the *Ente Opera Assistenza*, which provided unemployment relief, ONMI worked to create *laboratori femminili*. Organised in informal gatherings, rural women took courses in *tessiture rustiche* which taught them to spin and weave rough natural fibres. And while some urban women learned how to sew fabrics into uniforms and flags, others made garments for repatriated citizens, baby clothes for the poor, and similar products in the various initiatives launched by different federations. Beginning in 1931, these centres sprang up in provinces where PNF *federali* felt inclined to focus energy on this mixed form of mass organisation and social welfare. By 1937, the party controlled over 200 such establishments in both rural and urban areas throughout the North and Centre.<sup>23</sup>

The regime provided equipment for these centres by patronising the nation's only sewing-machine manufacturer. President of the firm, the Anonymous Society Necchi, Vittorio Necchi began making hefty donations to the Duce's social fund for premiums to large families in 1930. In exchange, the industrialist asked the Duce to salvage his company which failed to produce goods which could compete in price or quality with the superior Singer machine. With government backing in the form of protection, Necchi eventually squeezed his foreign rivals out of the Italian market, re-organised plant, streamlined production, and expanded his workforce. By 1934, Necchi supplied his re-modelled machines to all party, public, educational, and charitable institutions in the country. And annually from 1929, he donated 2,000 machines a year to the Duce who held lotteries in every province for their distribution amongst the nation's unemployed women workers.<sup>24</sup>

Complementing the work of the *Massale Rurali* stood the party's ancillary organisation for urban housewives, the *Sezioni Operale e Lavoranti a Domicilio*, which were created in March 1938.<sup>25</sup> While the role and development of the *fascio femminili* was even less a concern for the regime than that of the formal party apparatus, the home-workers' section became a top priority for provincial federations in industrialised regions. By 1939, over 200,000 women, some friends and

relatives of party members, others recruits from the urban working class, joined the army of piece-rate workers organised into state workshops. One month after the declaration of war against France in June 1940, the Ministry of War made a formal request soliciting the service of these seamstresses. At the behest of the national PNF directorate, rural and urban housewives commenced war work a few months later.<sup>26</sup>

### *Italian Rice Production*

Not until 1936 did the regime re-issue the social insurance coverage to agricultural labourers which it had withdrawn in 1923.<sup>27</sup> The syndical organisation of female rural workers proceeded haphazardly, especially amongst landless labourers of northern and central regions.<sup>28</sup> But one sector of the female rural population attracted much interest by fascism's corporative organisations. While labour exchanges controlling the movement of migrant rice workers were amongst the first to be established in fascist Italy,<sup>29</sup> national contracts covering planters, weeders, and harvesters came into effect in 1924.<sup>30</sup>

Paddies extended over scattered patches of wetland in Sicily, Tuscany, Emilia, the Veneto, and in Latium. In the aftermath of a decline in the price of rice on the world market which began in 1925, many of the growers in these regions converted fields to two-crop methods of cultivation, which interspersed wheat and rice, or gave land over entirely to more profitable grain production. The largest and most modern estates were concentrated in Piedmont and Lombardy where over 122,000 hectares produced 5 million quintals of the grain annually. While heat retarded plant growth in Sicily, rice flourished in the northwestern Po delta because of the natural abundance of water supply and marsh land, as well as a moderate climate.<sup>31</sup>

A large exporter of rice, and Europe's biggest grower, Italy produced grains which were inferior in quality and less uniform in shape than those of its big North American and Egyptian competitors who had begun to invade the European market in 1921.<sup>32</sup> Rice production was an important agricultural sector primarily because of the size of its labour force. Intensive methods of cultivation kept capital investment lower than outlays in wheat production. Profit margins could be high, especially for those large latifundists and enterprising leaseholders who dominated the Piedmontese plains.<sup>33</sup>

Cultivation of the cereal consisted of three phases which provided seasonal jobs for day labourers. Women and children almost exclusively performed the most gruelling, badly paid, and unhealthy work, the *mondatura*, which involved uprooting dead plants infested with algae and clearing away weeds. Mothers carrying infants on their backs, young children, and old women alike, the *mondine* stood bent over knee deep in water from dawn until dusk. Though the start of the season differed by region, weeding most frequently began in mid-June and lasted 36 days. In 1926, 233,000 women and children worked the rice fields of northwestern Italy, and 195,000 of these *risaiae* were migrant labourers.<sup>34</sup>

Travelling by special trains from destinations as far afield as Emilia, the rice workers arrived to find work conditions bad. Huddled in crowded and humid dormitories without furnishing, drinking water, or amenities, they slept on dirt floors on the dank hay their employers provided but did not replace for the duration of their stay. Though contracts varied by locality, most *mondine* brought their own bedding, but received room and board in exchange for a fixed portion of their wages. In local legend, the agrarians of Vercelli who owned and managed the great landed estates of the Po delta were mean providers and proffered broth made with decaying sausage meat as daily fare.<sup>35</sup> But, compared to the rations of rice soup and stale bread most workers received in neighboring provinces, the Vercelli *mondine* were comparatively lucky. In general, food and hygiene were poor everywhere, evidenced by the high incidence of gastro-intestinal diseases afflicting the *mondine*.<sup>36</sup>

Public sanitation laws passed in August 1907 prohibited the employment of minors younger than 14, of pregnant women in the last month before term, and of postpartum women in their first month after birth. The enactment entitled nursing mothers to breast-feeding time off from work, and made some schematic provision for mandatory health certification from authorities in the home commune and weekly health visits by district doctors in their place of work.<sup>37</sup> But like legislation on maternity leave and factory nurseries, employers largely ignored these rulings in the interests of economy. Outbreaks of malaria, tuberculosis, and bronchitis occurred regularly and struck the *mondine* more frequently than the men and boys engaged in hoeing and harvesting.<sup>38</sup> Because of the enormous health risks associated with

rice work, the 1907 sanitation act outlined a set of financial accords binding employers and municipal government to share the cost of medical services.

The act held communes responsible for distributing quinine, which was used in the prevention and treatment of malaria, radium lamps for tuberculosis therapy, and disinfectants and medicines for the cure of water-borne rashes, infections, and fevers, other common ailments amongst the *risalae*.<sup>39</sup> Procedure dictated that employers reimburse municipal authorities on a fixed *per capita* rate for the expenses incurred by public doctors. Beginning with a circular dated 23 May 1928, the fascist regime put pressure on local prefects, police and trade unionists to enforce employer compliance with the 1907 health norms.<sup>40</sup> The promulgation of revised laws on sanitation on the 22 March 1934 set even more stringent guidelines on statutory worker health provision.<sup>41</sup> Despite these efforts, nonetheless, conditions improved only nominally for the *risalae* during the fascist period.

The regime may have stepped up the reporting of infractions, but prefects and labour unionists had no real power to force intransigent employers to pay for improvements. Especially at a time when profit margins reached new lows, calls for a substantial injection of cash into expenditure agrarians long considered inessential had little chance of success. Prefect reports for the whole of the fascist period show just how commonplace were open contraventions of the law.<sup>42</sup> The high incidence of miscarriage and infant mortality which continued to prevail, prefects revealed, testified to the fact that employers regularly hired heavily pregnant women and new nursing mothers.<sup>43</sup> While few routinely provided medicines to prevent illness, most failed to observe even elementary health precautions. Many farmers refused to build sufficient huts to shelter all workers, to run pipes for potable water, and to install windows in barracks to keep out flies and mosquitoes.<sup>44</sup> Others were lax about paying their statutory contribution to municipal governments for the provision of health visits. Less than a handful of the 794 serious violations reported by the police to the prefect of Pavia after the 1926 season had been corrected by the following year.<sup>45</sup> And in a small commune in the province of Novara in 1936, 1,053 of the 2,383 migrant rice workers, as well as 349 local harvesters, fell ill with diseases identified as typhoid fever, tuberculosis, malaria, diphtheria, and boils and other

minor complaints.<sup>46</sup>

The fascist regime justified heightened government concern for rice workers on moral grounds. Official spokesmen expressed alarm over the terrible plight of the oppressed *risalae* who worked hard, were underfed, and badly paid. Commentators voiced concern about the poor health of these workers and their children. And they also expressed anxiety about the conditions of life on the campsites where men and women lived together and allegedly indulged in evening parties and sexual liaisons. The desire to see employers build proper dormitories to segregate male and female workers formed a part of the motivation behind their outrage. And calls for the strict enforcement of laws on child labour reflected the fear that male workers and local men had easy access to a store of young and nubile women.<sup>47</sup>

Another reason why the regime should chose to implement a selective campaign for rice workers was purely political. First a socialist and then a communist stronghold, the rice-growing provinces of the upper Po basin erupted into periodic unrest. In the spring of 1920, local rice workers throughout Piedmont started a strike which was met by a show of solidarity by migrant labourers who also held work stoppages. The longest to date from the beginning of organised militancy at the turn of the century, the action lasted 54 days and completely paralysed national production. And in the summer of 1923, *mondine* and *braccianti* throughout Vercelli had come out in full force to support a strike on the large latifundium of San Damiano in Carisio, long considered to be a model of landlord entrepreneurship and technical efficiency.<sup>48</sup>

On 8 June 1927, the fascist government asked ONMI to mount a broad campaign for social assistance in those Lombard and Piedmontese provinces in the Po valley which constituted the largest rice-producing region in Italy.<sup>49</sup> This move coincided with disturbances which broke out after a collective announcement by provincial employer associations of wage reductions. Local agrarians now felt the worse effects of the collapse in prices. Many producers in Lombardy and Piedmont had borrowed during the boom of 1923 to 1925 in order to finance technical improvements, boost production, and increase crop yields.<sup>50</sup>

In Vercelli, which produced 48 percent of the nation's annual rice crop, growers had bought chemicals and machinery, extended cultivation

into the pre-alpine lowlands by means of irrigation, built huge silos, and stockpiled a large surplus.<sup>51</sup> In the ensuing crisis, credit facilities froze everywhere throughout the basin, and banks and associations demanded debt repayment. Middling proprietors throughout the irrigated plain strained under the pressure of financial strangulation, while peasant families abandoned their small allotments throughout the *baraggia*, the patch of loamy terrain well away from the embankment. Many of the formerly prosperous renters who held farms carved out of the large estates bordering the provincial capital during the crisis of 1923 now went bankrupt. The monetary policy of the regime only worsened their plight, since revaluation caused land value to depreciate but rents to rise.<sup>52</sup>

Issued on the 1 June when the first influx of workers arrived, the proposed cut of 5 *lire* per day, which was equivalent to a 30 percent reduction, applied only to the *risaiae*. Not consulted by employers before the announcement, fascist trade unionists from Novara, Vercelli, Pavia, and Alessandria complained about the illegality. They issued a demand that agrarians respect negotiated labour contracts drawn up the previous March which set minimum pay scales for all categories of labourers. Submitted for arbitration, the dispute dragged on as the Magistracy of Labour in Rome, which covered all rice workers in Italy, deferred judgement. In the meantime, employers issued a compromise settlement on the 29 of that month when they announced they would be imposing 16 percent wage cuts on the *mondine*. When the court in Rome finally took a decision on the 14 July, magistrates supported agrarians in their move to reduce the costs of labour.<sup>53</sup>

A labour offensive stirred up by underground communist cadres met the first wage reduction in June 1927. Strike action which began in Treccate on the 28, where weeders abstained from work for two days, spread throughout the province of Novara, then hit Vercelli, Pavia, Milan, and Alessandria, involving as many as 20,000 workers. Local communists, who had contacts with comrades in the nearby textile towns of Biella, Gallarate, and Busto Arsizio, had already begun a campaign to unite factory women and rice workers into a political force of resistance against the regime. Beginning on the 20 June, they distributed by courier clandestine newspapers denouncing Mussolini as a pawn of the bourgeoisie. On the 30 June, round-ups and arrests began. While



the police detained over 100 strikers, they charged only seven *braccianti*, whom the special tribunal then condemned as subversives to two months' imprisonment in a labour colony. The forces of repression had shown some clemency in order to diffuse the turmoil.<sup>54</sup>

***ONMI and Rice Workers, 1927-1938***

ONMI federations began to implement policy in this tense and hostile environment. The periodic briefs leaders received from the police made no attempt to hide the political character of welfare in this region. The police commissioner of Vercelli asked ONMI *federali* to assist the police in their efforts to "enforce discipline", especially during winter months when discontent rose, and to uncover "suspected agitators" amongst the populace.<sup>55</sup> The 1927 "programme of action" undertaken by the ONMI federation of Novara stressed the "delicate nature" of social provision in a province whose one cash crop gave local peasants only four months of regular work a year.<sup>56</sup> Prefects encouraged ONMI to build a tight network of home visitors, using women party members as recruits in a drive to create "political collaboration amongst mothers of different classes". Domiciliary aid, they stressed, kept people from gathering outside government offices requesting relief. One of their concerns was to control crowds, while another was to minimise public awareness of the visible symptoms of poverty. Prefects also stressed that home aid gave public authorities the continuous contact they needed in order to monitor public opinion.<sup>57</sup> And the communiqués which passed between police and prefects revealed just how anxiously they waited to see whether welfare could in fact pacify the people.<sup>58</sup>

The orchestration of mass spectacle had a political resonance in these provinces too. Local prefects asked party and ONMI *federali* to organise festivities coinciding with the *Giornata della Madre e del Fanciullo*, declared a public holiday in 1932 and first celebrated on Christmas eve the following year when 5,788 municipalities across the nation, official reports claimed, held events ranging from baby beauty contests to exhibitions of Italian-produced kitchen ware.<sup>59</sup> In Pavia, Vercelli, and Novara, authorities defined these occasions as a "maximum political priority" and began planning for them months in advance. Local PNF and ONMI functionaries gave speeches on the "*tutela della razza*" and "*Magna Mater*", themes which focused on the wholesomeness of peasant toil and the benevolence of the state.<sup>60</sup> Determined to exploit

all channels of mass mobilisation, the regime pursued a policy which blurred the distinction between welfare and propaganda.

Mussolini showed a keen appreciation of the power of special benefits and privileges to influence public opinion. Each annual Mothers' Day celebration ended with public gatherings where PNF and ONMI authorities distributed cash premiums to carefully selected winners. After the creation of empire in 1936, the state sponsored nationwide competitions for the title of "Prolific Mothers of the Year" which also culminated on the *Giornata della Madre e del Bambino*. ONMI leaders lavished publicity on these annual events and encouraged all party and public institutions to participate. According to guidelines on entry, women contestants wrote letters describing themselves and their families; many of these contained detailed and desperate pleas for housing, jobs, and pay increases. While ONMI officials vetted applicants, prefects, the police, and PNF *federali* conducted investigations concerning the moral character and the political persuasion of candidates. The letters were sent to Rome for Mussolini's final decision.<sup>61</sup>

In local celebrations, and at the final reception at the Palazzo Venezia in Rome, fascist officialdom made a great display of public gratitude by granting a few of the requests made by mothers and by bestowing financial benefits like income tax rebates, public transport discounts, food coupons, and free holidays on the most prolific.<sup>62</sup> In addition to medals of honour and childrearing diplomas, these elected exemplars of Italian motherhood received especially large *premi di natalità*, commemorating those who had borne the most offspring since 1929.<sup>63</sup> The birth premiums were scaled according to reproductive output, with 50 *lire* given for each child produced up to the sixth, 100 *lire* for each child up to the tenth, and 200 *lire* for each child up to the twentieth. Not all winners were members of the fascist party. And each year's theme differed so factory workers, peasants, public employees, and artisans all had a chance at the cash prizes. In 1937, Novara sent its first prolific couple, both *braccianti* who worked the rice fields, to Rome to be received by the Duce.<sup>64</sup> An economical form of propaganda, the benefit scheme included *premi di nuptialità*, which were given to young married women who had produced a child annually in their first five years of marriage.

Somewhat more difficult to organise, and considerably more costly

to run, welfare programmes in rice provinces focused on opening state nurseries for *risaiae*. For access to free childminding facilities available from May until September each year, *mondine* paid a small inscription fee of 2 *lire*, which was waived for party members. This provision constituted the single largest expenditure in the budget of the provincial federation of ONMI in Vercelli, which was the main receiving province for migrant labour and had the highest number of rice workers. Secondary policy targets included the creation of clinics for migrants, home visits for resident workers, and forms of poverty relief such as the distribution of milk, food, and occasional subsidies. Expenses for these initiatives varied enormously in rice-producing provinces. As in all other projects, ONMI tried to minimise its share of the funding by soliciting donations from employer and labour organisations, other public institutions, private charities, citizens and local governments.

Provincial federations, however, encountered a great deal of indifference to ONMI and its 'campaign for rice workers'. And the administrative and organisational difficulties experienced by most ONMI *federali* across the nation disrupted welfare development here too. When in April 1926 ONMI authorities in Novara began to implement the finance procedure outlined by the 1926 regulation, municipal governments, beneficent institutions, and Congregations of Charity refused to part with those funds which comprised their statutory contributions to the institution. Failure to create an efficient bureaucratic mechanism for the collection of money from these sources affected social programmes by obstructing institutional growth on a local level. By early 1928, about 150 of the 230 communes in ONMI's provincial administration of Novara still lacked committees; and 50 of the roughly 80 standing *comitati* had yet to begin effecting any form of *assistenza mondariso* because of what authorities defined as a "total lack of sufficient resources".<sup>66</sup>

Another obstacle to institutional development, many poor communes simply could not afford to invest a portion of their tax revenue in ONMI at a time when revaluation caused government debts to swell. And other municipalities lacked private charitable institutions altogether, so the contributions they made to ONMI's central social fund proved negligible.<sup>66</sup> By 1928, some communes and institutions in Novara began to pay their quarterly dues in arrears, but the

federation accounts for the whole of the following decade show backlogs and indebtedness continued.<sup>67</sup> A significant amount of the administrative work of provincial federations consisted of this constant haggling over finance.

But some of the responsibility for the slowness of institutional development lay with the rigidity of financial rulings in the 1926 regulation. Though an important rice-growing area, the commune of Oleggio in Novara had not yet received any grant from provincial headquarters by 1941. Yearly rejections from the provincial capital focused on the failure of municipal leaders to open a clinic, a condition for release of funds laid down by ONMI's founding statutes. ONMI leaders in Oleggio had been unable to do so because local government had never donated suitable buildings. When the commune finally found an abandoned villa in the centre of town in the spring of 1941, the provincial federation came up with a grant of 3,500 *lire* for its upkeep. The clinic never opened during the fascist period, however, since ONMI authorities could find no doctors or nurses to run the consultancy on a volunteer basis.<sup>68</sup>

ONMI provincial leaders in Novara deferred welfare development in Oleggio because of their strict adherence to the law. They never even considered the policy option of bending regulations by supporting Oleggio authorities in their efforts to organise programmes more appropriate to local resources and needs. Plans for a food and milk distribution service for mothers who worked the rice fields remained frustrated. ONMI never really got off the ground in Oleggio despite years of wasteful bureaucratic negotiations.<sup>69</sup> Welfare organisation at the local level proceeded at a piecemeal pace because ONMI had to appeal not just to government agencies but also to the general public to provide buildings, money, and volunteers for projects.

When ONMI *federali* in Novara approached the association of rice producers in the autumn of 1927 with a plan to share the costs of campsite nurseries, they discovered that not one agrarian in the province was prepared to comply.<sup>70</sup> The federation received assurances from provincial leaders of the *fasci femminili* that the party would assist them in their efforts. But the ensuing process of creating these impromptu nurseries in an area where neither local élites nor the general public were keen supporters of the regime went badly. Members of the female *fascio* promised to make arrangements for the

*Giovani Italiane* organisation to launch training courses in puericulture and *cultura igienica* to prepare young fascists to become a corps of childminders. Negotiations though fell through abruptly in November 1927, partly because the tenuous hold the PNF had in these provinces precluded an active involvement in welfare organisation.<sup>71</sup>

The president of the ONMI federation in Novara turned to the directors of the public hospital and the foundling home in the provincial capital for help, but both proved unwilling to provide space and personnel for a crèche. And when he appealed to the general public to open up improvised nurseries in their homes, this strategy achieved fewer results than anticipated.<sup>72</sup> Federal leaders of ONMI abandoned all hope of ever creating a network of nurseries in rural communes since they had failed to do so in the provincial capital where most of the welfare institutions were located and landowning élites resided. They decided instead to concentrate funds on poverty and unemployment relief through the distribution of small subsidies and food packets to families in extreme hardship.<sup>73</sup>

In Vercelli, the nursery scheme had more success due mostly to local backing. Here too rice producers refused to fund the project, but private citizens and institutions filled this gap by setting up nurseries. The active involvement of female party members proved an important asset, as did the participation of prominent women philanthropists. While ONMI carried almost the full cost for the maintenance of nurseries and for the food given to children at lunch-time, the federation received a substantial contribution from the union of agricultural labourers. In addition to these funds, provincial leaders managed to negotiate an agreement for a sizable annual donation from two local banks.<sup>74</sup>

By October 1932, however, the provincial federation in Vercelli had managed to create public *asili nidi* in only 32 of the hundreds of communes in its administration. Most functioned as casual shelters in private homes or public venues provided by the local Congregation of Charity, the foundling home, or a similar institution. The provision of free meals, and in some cases medical care, may have filled a real social need in this province where wage reductions, unemployment, and the cost of living rose dramatically after 1927. But the total number of children minded at public expense seems minute in comparison to the actual size of the agricultural labour force involved in rice produc-

tion. With over 40,000 migrant women, 16,000 local female rice workers, and 30,000 male harvesters, Vercelli was the largest producing province in Italy. Throughout the period 1927 to 1932, however, ONMI assisted little over 2,300 children under the age of six years in the agency's nurseries; and in any one season during those years, only between 400 and 700 children of the *risaia* could be found in state nurseries.<sup>75</sup>

While the federation in Vercelli blamed employer disregard for the failure of the nursery campaign, leaders actually encountered the same problem which had influenced ONMI officials in Novara to abandon the project. Women rice workers, ONMI leaders admitted reluctantly, simply refused to relinquish their children to the care of impersonal government agencies. ONMI authorities encountered a great deal of popular hostility to their intrusions in private life, some of which was clearly politically motivated. While many women resisted state incursions because of the long-standing custom for *risaia* to bring their children with them into the paddies, others did so because they did not want to be associated with a fascist institution. Especially in those few communes where ONMI had managed to secure the involvement of female party members, working women seemed almost defiant in their renunciation of any collaboration with the regime's agents. Even when in 1929 the PNF and ONMI together decided to launch a *premio di monda* scheme in Vercelli offering women 50 *lire* to abstain from work or to bring their babies to public nurseries, the scheme failed to attract any popular support.<sup>76</sup>

Other programmes had a limited impact too. Plans to establish permanent clinics for working families in all communes under rice cultivation never materialised. By 1932, the federation in Vercelli had managed to open only one such *consultorio* in the province, and even this was run directly by the nuns who governed a foundling home in the capital city. Far from providing medical services, the centre administered alms to the poor by distributing olive oil, powdered milk, and bread to a couple hundred women a year.<sup>77</sup> Because the federation had been unable to create a permanent social fund for *mondariso* aid by banking residual cash and using interest payments to cover costs, leaders lived hand to mouth accruing debts in their accounts only partially relieved by annual grants from central headquarters in Rome.<sup>78</sup>

The plan for mothers' kitchens had seemed a sensible way to alleviate the chronic malnutrition of working women. But this programme too had a limited impact, since *mondine* in rural outposts were effectively excluded from taking part in free-lunch programmes established in the provincial capital. Because of the anticipated costs and transport problems, a mobile unit carrying food parcels to campsites and the surrounding villages of the *baraggia* proved an impractical objective. In the end, Vercelli *federali* expressed some considerable dissatisfaction that ONMI had been reduced to providing only occasional relief to unemployed townfolk. Created in 1928, the province's only refectory was located in the city centre, was managed by the Congregation of Charity on ONMI's behalf, and provided free meals for roughly fifty women and their children daily. But the kitchen was open for only four months of the year.<sup>79</sup>

In the neighboring province of Alessandria where unemployment rose considerably when local agrarians curtailed rice production by over 50 percent in 1927, ONMI leaders also witnessed their plans for lasting welfare organisation collapse into frantic emergency-relief operations. Reflecting the gravity of the economic crisis, ONMI's provincial delegation decided in late 1927 to provide continuous cash subsidies to the poor rather than one-off handouts. Following this unusual course of action in 1928, the agency supported 116 families from Asti, Casale, Novi, and Tortona for over a year with monthly allowances covering food and housing expenditure.<sup>80</sup> Between 1927 and 1931, ONMI leaders in Alessandria also instituted an independent initiative for *assistenza invernale* which involved the mass collection and distribution of clothing, coal, sugar, rice flour, and powdered milk to 21,816 families throughout the province, who numbered 64,082 people in all.<sup>81</sup> Despite donations from institutions and individuals, the federation reported to the prefect, who kept in close contact with welfare leaders, that as of April 1932 all resources for this costly project were "spent". Leaders announced that they were forced to suspend forms of continuous economic aid in order to rebuild the budget. Only in the most urgent cases involving the death of a parent or extreme hardship could ONMI now offer prolonged cash benefits. As a consequence, 14 families received subsidies for a three-month period each during the winter of 1932 when unemployment reached unprecedented levels.<sup>82</sup>

Nor did this situation improve after 1932. The economic troubles plaguing central headquarters affected budgeting and planning in all provincial federations. While subsidies comprised a major cash outlay only in Alessandria, other provinces in this region were forced to cut back on their more costly initiatives. As elsewhere in Italy, forms of social assistance shifted to become more periodic and less substantial after 1932.<sup>63</sup> In these provinces, welfare did not develop in the 1930s so much as stagger along at a faltering pace. Prefects were still sending circulars to ONMI leaders in 1941 imploring them to create the broad collaboration with the *fasci femminili* needed in order to implement reforms fully.<sup>64</sup> By recognising the acute hardship suffered by *risalae*, the regime did set in motion a long overdue process of building an institutional infrastructure for social welfare. But the loose framework of services which ONMI built during the depression would have to wait until the postwar period for further development.

The stirrings of discontent did not disappear after 1927. Police reports stressed that the public mood grew tense as the depression worsened. Salaries, they confirmed, were far below subsistence given rising costs of food and housing. While shopkeepers in Vercelli had widely publicised 10 percent price cuts on all goods in the aftermath of the initial wage reduction in June 1927, they quickly reverted to standard business practice to insure growing profits. The clandestine literature and the public graffiti which they uncovered in greater frequency, the police revealed, reflected popular desperation at the crisis which had turned the whole rice-growing area into a national disaster. The police attempted to keep a close grip on the situation in these provinces by intensifying surveillance operations to discover communist cells.<sup>65</sup>

The political instability of the whole region increased too because of harsh controls on population movement. The regime's *lotta contro urbanesimo* took on a new political meaning as prefects and the police frantically sought to keep the indigent off the streets of big cities. When the depression deepened, Mussolini personally authorised state support to cover the costs of free transport and food for the journey for those who were forcibly "repatriated". Monthly prefect reports revealed that thousands of unemployed and homeless people regularly received banishment orders to return to their village of domicile.<sup>66</sup> Prefects and police also worked through labour exchange centres in



rural areas whose staff were authorised to refuse to relinquish *libretti* to agricultural workers who wished to escape to Milan and Turin. With channels of rural flight closed, the Piedmontese and Lombard countryside became flooded with the jobless and hungry. The Council of Ministers, who sent regular circulars to prefects about the programme, explained that they wanted to crack down on urban migration because when people arrived in the city they went door to door begging for jobs and food. The "spectacle of mass poverty", they stated, was a political embarrassment to the regime.<sup>87</sup>

***Fascist Agrarian Policy: The 'battaglia del riso', 1927-1938***

In the summer of 1927, producers throughout the Piedmontese plains began dumping stockpiled rice on the home market at 70 *lire* a quintal in order to recoup losses. The export price had fallen to just over 115 *lire* a quintal, but the continued contraction of world markets accentuated the panic overcoming commercial farmers who were dependent on foreign outlets for profits. In response to this crisis, prominent growers organised into a consortium in the winter of 1927. With its headquarters in Vercelli, the *Consorzio Nazionale Fascista Riscultori* determined to regain control of pricing, squeeze out small and inefficient producers, and strengthen the market position of Italian rice.<sup>88</sup>

Through links with the banking and business community, the consortium promoted the creation of the *Istituto Federale di Credito Agrario* in 1927. The association granted large landowners and leaseholders more favourable credit terms by rescheduling their annual debt repayments from November to February. The extension on loans gave agrarians more time to sell their crops after the October harvest.<sup>89</sup> The consortium fulfilled its main goal of regulating the market by imposing the *marchio nazionale* on farmers and industrialists in the spring of 1928. The trademark list assigned fixed prices to various brands of rice on the basis of size and level of refinement. Ostensibly designed to protect the consumer from inferior and broken grains by enforcing strict quality controls, the grading system favoured the producer since the consortium reserved the finer rice purchased from members for exportation. The *marchio* also worked to the detriment of small growers who could not afford to invest sufficient capital to produce a consistently better product.<sup>90</sup>

The strategy to defend the competitiveness of export rice failed,

for between 1927 and 1931 prices on the world market fell by over 58 percent to 64 *lire* a quintal. The consortium sold stock amassed over these years at an increasing loss, and was finally compelled to liquidate assets in 1931. From this crisis emerged the *Ente Nazionale Risi*, a powerful lobby determined to put pressure on government to protect the interests of rice growers. Pursuing different commercial aims from the *consorzio*, ENRISI sought primarily to encourage the growth of the home market for rice.<sup>91</sup>

In January 1931, the president of the national organisation, Aldo Rossini, began negotiations with Mussolini, Giacomo Acerbo, the Minister of Agriculture and Forests, and Giuseppe Bottai, Under-Secretary of Corporations. Rossini pressed for acceptance of his proposal for Italian refiners of cereal products to blend rice flour into wheat meal. Eager to protect native agriculture, Mussolini gave Rossini full assurance the government would see rice producers through the crisis.<sup>92</sup> In February 1931, Acerbo approved the *miscela* scheme, though he set a three percent quota on the maximum quantity of rice permitted in grain mixtures. Rice farmers had asked government for a five percent minimum.<sup>93</sup>

To prepare public opinion for these reforms, ENRISI launched a massive publicity campaign imploring Italian mothers to improve the health of their children by feeding them white *risotto* and rice-based porridge.<sup>94</sup> The government also granted merchants permission to sell these and other products in pharmacies as part of a plan to market rice as a specialty health food.<sup>95</sup> Accorded a lucrative contract with the armed forces in 1931, ENRISI began to supply the military at a reduced rate in exchange for the security of a long-term client. Other benefits included an agreement with the Ministry of Communications guaranteeing special discounts on trains to cover the high costs of transport. To salvage the sector, Mussolini also issued a hefty state subsidy. ENRISI used the grant of 80 million *lire* to buy stock from members and encourage exports. The national organisation artificially inflated the price of rice on the home market by forcing producers to sell a percentage of their crop, amassing a huge reserve, and controlling market distribution. The organisation offered a premium to exporters to offset the lower price rice commanded on the international market.<sup>96</sup>

The new system of quality controls to insure a high price and

market regulation to minimise the risks of competition failed to redress the vulnerability of Italian rice to market fluctuations. The price of rice on the world market rose to just over 84 *lire* in 1932, but the volume of Italian exports of the grain continued to shrink annually thereafter.<sup>97</sup> ENRISI presented new opportunities for protected producers to exploit the system of state concessions. The organisation issued numerous complaints of fraud against agrarians who made false declarations of low yields in order to avoid giving ENRISI a large portion of their crop. Refiners too took advantage of subsidies by lying about the price they had paid for raw rice in order to claim big premiums. Periodic dumping at lower prices than those fixed by the *ente* also undermined the policy of making the consumer pay for the costs of restructuring Italian agriculture.<sup>98</sup>

Fascism was losing the "battaglia del riso" both at home and abroad. The regime's intervention to increase internal demand for the product failed as *per capita* consumption declined after 1931.<sup>99</sup> The continuing crisis of market contraction provoked further bankruptcies and buyouts, a higher concentration of ownership, and the instability of tenancies and leaseholds throughout the northwestern Po region. National production continued to fall despite state protection.<sup>100</sup> Those agrarian capitalists who survived did so largely because they managed to realise profits by compressing labour costs.

The wage offensive which began in 1927 gained momentum as the earnings of female rice workers shrank from 21 to 14 *lire* a day by 1930.<sup>101</sup> Employers also introduced wider differentials between the pay rates of local and migrant labourers. By offering migrants lower wages, agrarians made considerable savings because *forestieri* comprised the bulk of the labour force in all rice-producing provinces. In Novara, 9,700 local inhabitants worked the *mondatura*, while over 13,000 migrant women weeded.<sup>102</sup> And while the number of migrant workers in Vercelli had dropped from 40,000 in 1927 to 23,000 in 1931, they still predominated over the local labour force which remained constant at just over 16,000 weeders.<sup>103</sup>

The *forestieri* suffered greater unemployment than local labourers as growers now discriminated against them in hiring practice. The staff of local labour exchanges were instructed to give employment preference to local residents in producing provinces. Part of the economising trend, Piedmontese growers took advantage of the compe-

tion for jobs in a shrinking labour market by imposing harsher employment terms on workers. They began to make larger proportional deductions for room and board from the already reduced wage packets of impoverished *risalae*. Rumours about bailiffs on the big estates who charged a percentage of wages as bribe money in exchange for scarce jobs reached trade union officers who were powerless to prohibit illegalities of this nature.<sup>104</sup> The assault on the livelihood of women agricultural workers did not abate during the fascist period. Official day rates for *mondine* fell to 11 *lire* for locals and 10 for migrants in 1931, but remained somewhat stationary in the following two years. They dropped again to 9.75 *lire* for locals and 9.50 for migrants in the period 1934 to 1935. Pay scales began to rise again in 1936 for the first time in almost a decade, but they failed to reach earlier levels. By 1938, women's salaries arrived at 13.22 *lire* for locals and 12.93 for migrants. The wages women workers received in 1938 were 62 percent lower than they had been in 1927.<sup>105</sup>

Fascist unions continued to oppose employers despite government pressure on them to support the policy of wage cuts. Labour syndicates proved unable to combat illegal wage reductions. While they managed to bring wages up to 11 *lire* in 1931 from the 8 *lire* proposed by the agrarian association, they failed to enforce the agreement so some employers offered desperate workers only 6 *lire* a day.<sup>106</sup> Violations of labour contract stipulations on minimum pay and a growing awareness of employers' exploitation of the unemployment crisis provoked a massive strike action in 1931. Notwithstanding the increased police presence at labour exchanges and train stations after 1927, an organised labour offensive began on the 3 June 1931 when thousands of *mondine* throughout the Piedmontese plains refused to accept the meagre pay offers of agrarians.<sup>107</sup>

For the next two weeks, abstentions and delays in the arrival of migrants continued to cripple rice production. Communist cadres encouraged labour insurgency by distributing resistance literature and by holding sporadic underground meetings throughout Novara, Vercelli, Pavia, Alessandria, and Milan. The police arrested agitators, rounded up hundreds of workers, and attempted to impose some discipline on campsites by encircling them with road-blocks. But it was employers who gained the upper hand in the dispute and managed to deflect the movement. Agrarians lured *risalae* back to work with promises to pay

their wages in full before weeding began. By the end of the month, militancy subsided everywhere as *mondine* begrudgingly accepted their 8 *lire* a day *in anticipo*. Reduced demand for labour and rising unemployment had made rice workers desperate enough for jobs to conclude the stoppage for a mere cash advance. But the political quiescence which economic depression and police repression brought to the region proved to be fragile. First in 1943 and again in 1944 and 1945, rice workers and factory women throughout Piedmont and Lombardy rose up in support of mass strikes against the regime.<sup>108</sup>

### ***Fascist Welfare and Women Workers***

This section of the thesis has attempted to reveal the achievements and limitations of fascist welfare. Though progressive and far-reaching in nature, most of the objectives in the 1926 package of reforms remained unrealised by 1938. Training courses for ONMI personnel had not created a new élite of social workers; the much vaunted cash premiums to poor mothers as encouragements to frequent clinics never materialised nationwide; and, most importantly, the promise to protect women and children at work had had few tangible results.

Factory women as a whole received paltry benefits from government. Partly because the regime chose to see women as mothers rather than as workers, ONMI never developed a determined response to the depression. Plans for the gradual development of a welfare apparatus on the local level collapsed as ONMI federations were forced to dole out alms to the poor. While kitchens filled a real need, they failed to emerge as a planning priority everywhere in the peninsula and islands. The enormous variation in the type and quality of welfare institutions local authorities provided remained a reality under fascism despite moves to create a national health system. And it seems doubtful that women received enough sustained and meaningful social assistance from these agencies to actually improve their health and that of their children. Clinics did not go beyond the mere provision of occasional hardship relief with a propagandistic purpose to become a truly mass organisation of medical services. The educational aspect of social welfare severely limited the scope and effectiveness of these institutions. The evidence suggests that while the numbers of women and children ONMI "assisted" during the 1930s increased, the benefits provided became more periodic and superficial. Selective policies

aimed at rural women workers also failed to secure the adhesion of the masses to the state.

This section of the thesis has attempted to show just how capricious and insubstantial fascist welfare was when set against the economic conditions under which many working women were forced to raise their families. The few social gains granted to women as mothers seem especially insignificant given the real losses they experienced as workers. Wage reductions and unemployment of growing magnitude and the continuing reality of women's underpaid and unprotected work contrive to expose the fundamental weakness of fascist welfarism. Improvements in public provision were destined to have a limited effect, either as a political palliative or as an incentive for population increase, unless accompanied by a substantial betterment in the material standing of the working class under the dictatorship.

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- 75 ASV, GP, serie I, ONMI, m. 23 (20), f. 199, relazioni of the Federazione Provinciale Vercellese dell'ONMI to the prefect (by trimester), 14 April 1927 to 7 October 1932, which give full details about the rising costs of this programme and the *presenze compressive* of infants.
- 76 *Ibid.*, relazione sull'attività svolta nel terzo trimestre, 1932, 7 October 1932, about the lack of success of the premium *monda* scheme; and ASN, P, serie I, cat. 26, AG, b. 2, relazione of 18 May 1932 from the prefect to Sileno Fabbri about the "*sistema patriarcale*" of rural families and women's continued resistance to the programme.
- 77 *Ibid.*, relazione, 7 October 1932: the costs for the centre amounted to 3,596 *lire* for the period from April to December, 1932; and see ASV, ONMI, m. 163, consultorio, 1936-1943, on the *frequenza*, which remained low.
- 78 ASV, GP, m. 23 (20), f. 199, relazione dello secondo trimestre 1932, which contains a full *elenco* of institutions and budget breakdowns for the whole period.
- 79 ASV, GP, serie I, ONMI, m. 23 (20), f. 199, relazione sull'attività svolta nel secondo trimestre del'anno 1932: daily admissions numbered between 35 and 50 women and the cost for public authorities came to roughly 4 *lire* for every meal served.
- 80 ASA, GP, B. 27, CS, relazioni periodiche sulla situazione politica, relazione of ONMI provincial president, F. Carbone, to the prefect, 30 December 1929 about continuous subsidies.
- 81 *Ibid.*, Carbone's relazione, 11 September 1929; and f. 4.1, relazioni trimestrali, relazione of 4 April 1932.
- 82 *Ibid.*, sf. 4.1, relazione of 31 March 1932; relazione of primo trimestre, 29 March 1933; carabinieri's report of 29 December 1932 about the political effects of cutbacks (in some cases subsidies to families were enlarged to as much as 300 *lire* per month to offset the shorter period of recovery).
- 83 *Ibid.*, relazione of 2 June 1933, which makes reference to the "*sofferenza*" of the people which ONMI could not redress because of "*mancaanza di mezzi*".

- 84 ASN, GP, serie I, cat. 26, AG, b. 90, f. 4, circular from ONMI president to provincial federation, 1 April 1941; and letter from ONMI provincial federation to prefect and secretary of the women's party section, 11 July 1941.
- 85 ASV, GP, serie I, m. 79 (86), f. 363, situazione politica della provincia, commander of the *carabinieri* to the prefect, 31 January 1931.
- 86 AST, GP, m. 322, urbansesimo-affari vari, monthly prefect reports to the Interior Ministry, on numbers rounded up and sent home, 1929-1937; circular from Council of Ministers, 4 December 1937; and Mussolini's letter to the prefect of Turin, dated 1 April 1933, outlining the system of payment of 200 *lire* to repatriated families who "non hanno lavoro, ne probabilità di trovarlo, per allontanarne da Torino". The Duce advanced 2 million *lire* to the prefect of Turin for the campaign.
- 87 Ibid., relazione mensili sul movimento migratorio, from the police to the prefect; including an *elenco* of the people "repatriated" during these years. And on the politics of internal migration, see A. Treves, *Le migrazioni interne nell'Italia fascista* (Turin, 1974), pp. 110-33.
- 88 D. Brianta, "Il riso è frumento", *Annali di Storia Pavese*, nos. 12-13 (June, 1986), pp. 313-24.
- 89 E. Busca and N. Poltini, *Economia risicola Italiana in cento anni di cronaca* (Rome, 1955), pp. 59-64.
- 90 ASV, GP, m. 22, f. 187, CNFA, relazione of June 1932, second part on the financial situation of producers and the inflated price of rice on the home market.
- 91 M. Boggeri, *La crisi risicola e L'Ente Nazionale Risi* (Padua, 1932), p. 88.
- 92 Anon., "Per la risicoltura", *La Sesia*, 13 January 1931.
- 93 Anon., "A proposito della farina di riso nella panificazione", *La Sesia*, 6 February 1931; and Anon., "La risposta dell'on Acerbo", *La Sesia*, 20 February 1931.
- 94 Anon., "Per il nostro riso", *La Sesia*, 30 January 1931; and Ibid., "Riso e sorriso donano un bel viso", February 1931.
- 95 Boggeri, *La crisi risicola*, pp. 104-5.
- 96 Ibid., p. 54.
- 97 Ibid., pp. 119-23.
- 98 Ibid., pp. 82-3.
- 99 D. Brianta, "Il riso è frumento", p. 319.

- 100 ASV, GP, m. 22, f. 187, CNFA, relazione of 29 December 1936 on the crisis.
- 101 Istituto Nazionale di Economia Agraria, *I salari agricoli nelle zone ad economia capitalistico della Bassa Lombardia nel 1881-1930* (Pavia, 1931), p. 269.
- 102 ASN, P. serie I, cat. 15, risaiae, b. 14, Federazione Sindacati Fascisti Agricoltori, relazione 13 June 1931.
- 103 *Assistenza fascista alle mondariso*, p. 6; Anon., "Disoccupazione invernale", *La Sesia*, 22 September 1931.
- 104 ASV, P, serie I, m. 71, f. 331, Sindacati Fascisti dell'Agricoltura, relazione to prefect, 3 September 1928; in one case a migrant harvester was forced to pay one quarter of his wages to secure a place on the squads.
- 105 Anon., "I contadini", pp. 58-62; ASN, P, m. 71, f. 331, copy of the broadsheet, *Il Lavoro Fascista*, on salary reductions.
- 106 Anon., "La monda del riso" *La Sesia*, 8 May 1931; "La vertenza per la tariffa", in *Ibid.*, 19 May 1931; and "Le tariffe per la monda del riso" in *Ibid.*, 19 June 1931.
- 107 ASN, P, serie I, cat. 15, b. 14, relazione of 13 June 1931; see also the testimonies of D. Facelli and L. Balocco, "Lo sciopero delle mondariso: Vercelli 1931" *Donna e Politica* (February, 1977), pp. 12-3.
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PART III.  
FROM CHURCH CHARITY TO STATE WELFARE;  
THE ILLEGITIMACY QUESTION, 1890-1938

Credo che esista contro la carità legale un immenso pregiudizio e che si possa predire che tutte le società arrivate ad un certo punto di sviluppo, debbano necessariamente ricorrere alla carità legale. E porto avviso che l'esperienza dimostrerà in un non lontano avvenire come la carità legale, bene amministrata, governata da savie norme, possa produrre immensi benefici senza avere quelle funestre conseguenze che alcuni temono.

Count Camillo Benso di Cavour,  
1851

## Illegitimate Infants and the Liberal State

This section of the thesis explores social provision for illegitimate children in Italy. The section begins in the liberal period when central government began to legislate on behalf of foundlings and ends in the fascist period when ONMI launched a major campaign against child abandonment. The second part of this thesis examined the nature of the care provided by new agencies created during the dictatorship, kitchens and clinics. The central hypothesis offered was that the regime placed limits on the growth of ONMI because of its outlook on planning and investment. Ideological constraints also restricted the impact of welfare because of eugenics' clear preference for educational programmes. This part of the thesis asks how fascism changed those institutions which it inherited from liberalism.

This section charts the slow and uneasy transformation of *opere pie* first into *enti morali* under liberalism and then into *servizi sociali* during the dictatorship. Private charities became public beneficent institutions during the liberal period. Fascism attempted to modernise the character and improve the efficiency of the institutional edifice liberalism bequeathed to the regime. Because both the liberal and the fascist governments sought to reduce the rates of mortality of foundlings, illegitimacy policy affords the historian an opportunity to assess the problem of long-term welfare development. This section focuses on the changes and continuities in state provision from liberalism to fascism.

The discussion of foundling homes and the system of provision which surrounded these institutions during the liberal period serves two main purposes which tie into the broader theme of this thesis. Firstly, the description of the shortcomings of social assistance under liberalism aims to highlight the enormity of the task which fascism undertook in 1927 when ONMI began to implement illegitimacy policy. Despite moves by liberal reformers to improve the survival rates of children who were reared publically, foundlings homes remained unclean, unsafe, and uncaring institutions which failed to provide even the minimum requirements for the maintenance of life. Secondly, fascism's experiment to promote alternatives to institutionalised and impersonal care failed and in 1934 ONMI dismantled the illegitimacy



programme. New rulings that year caused the foundling home to re-assert itself as the institutional centre of state welfare for children who were born outside the comparatively protective confines of the family.

***The Problem of Illegitimacy from Liberalism to Fascism***

In the nineteenth century, the unifying state began to change the structure of the nation's rich ecclesiastical and charitable establishment. Motivated by new notions of public responsibility for the well-being of *trovatelli*, successive liberal governments attempted to impose secular authority over private institutions. From 1865 onwards, they engaged in a struggle to abolish the Church's *ruote* and to reform its foundling homes. Customary devices for the deposit of unwanted infants throughout Catholic Europe, these turnstiles dated back to the papacy of Innocent III who founded the first *ruota* in Rome's Santo Spirito convent during a plague in 1198.<sup>1</sup> A revolving window with a tray attached to the bottom, the *ruota* was inserted in a niche in the walls of pious "receiving societies", most commonly organised by a sisterhood in a parish church or convent. Once the infant was placed within the wheel, a bell was rung to alert the nuns of the new arrival. An outgrowth of the Church's wish to hide sin from society and to save the souls of un-baptised infants, the arrangement sustained the social attitudes which shrouded "unwed motherhood" in secrecy and shame.

Babies sometimes arrived with notes attached to their swaddling clothes which gave the name of the child, a confession of guilt on the part of the mother, a promise to return, and reasons for the abandonment. The less fortunate were found in a state of exposure, illness, or hunger. If the abandonment had taken place at night, the nuns often discovered a corpse at sunrise. Some establishments reported that they collected an alarmingly high number of dead babies from the turnstiles. Despite the suspicion that *ruote* were used as a form of infanticide or as a way for poor people to avoid paying burial costs, the sisters made no inquiries as to the identity of the mother.<sup>2</sup>

In the liberal period, this system came under increasing attack from reformers who called the *ruota* a "barbaric and ingenious invention of Christian charity for child murder".<sup>3</sup> The Church considered it immoral that an unwed mother should nurse and rear her own child because of the strong belief that procreation should take

place only within marriage. Catholic dogma viewed the unwed mother as a woman who had fallen from grace and her child as the fruit of sin. Both religious doctrine and Roman law classified an illegitimate infant as a *fillius nullius*, a 'child of nobody' because it had been born outside the legal and Christian family. The prime purpose of receiving societies was to save the child's soul from perpetual limbo after death by reclaiming the infant into the Christian congregation through the ritual of baptism and the bestowal of a name. Infants were farmed out to wetnurse and then raised in orphanages and colleges.

Critics of the turnstile also focused their attention on the foundling hospital. As government authorities became more aware of problems of public health, they came to see the *brefotroffio* as an archaic institution. In 837, Archbishop Datus opened the first foundling home in Milan which took at its motto *bimbo nutro*, words which appeared on plaques on many foundling homes' doors. In one of a number of parliamentary discussions on abandoned infants in January 1891, Prime Minister Crispi stated that above the portals of all *brefotroffi* the following warning should appear: "Here children are killed at great public expense".<sup>4</sup>

Foundling homes depended on external wetnurses and farmed-out infants suffered high levels of death. The directors of these institutions were often the most outspoken critics of the system of "mercenary feeding" which they struggled to supervise. Decio Albini, who ran the nation's second oldest *brefotroffio*, the Santo Spirito in Rome, blamed the *balia* for the very poor rates of survival amongst foundlings. In 1895, he wrote: "We send espoused infants out to wetnurse in the same way that a shepherd sends his sheep to the butcher".<sup>5</sup>

New ideas about how society should care for outcast infants had a growing impact in the nineteenth century. In their attempts to save the lives of foundlings, authorities in the liberal period took a dim view of women who abandoned their babies to the clutches of mercenary feeders. They argued that unwed mothers had a moral responsibility to breast-feed their own infants. The directors of foundling homes determined to uncover the identity of unwed mothers and to force these women to reclaim their infants. Reformers justified these measures by asserting that maternal reclamation rehabilitated fallen women. As the *ruote* slowly disappeared from the Italian countryside, new coercive

and restrictive forms of public beneficence replaced the device which had made abandonment an anonymous act. The fascist regime continued these efforts to reform single mothers by building on the ideological and institutional foundation which had been set during the liberal period.

***From Church Charity to Public Beneficence, 1855-1890***

During the unification of Italy, Church charity came under attack by government authorities who argued that traditional almsgiving was not appropriate to a modern society. One motive behind the successive enactments which abolished the privileges enjoyed by the ecclesiastical establishment and its charitable institutions was the belief that public forms of relief would better serve the interests of social and economic progress. Church charity was felt to be an encouragement to pauperism and dependence at a time when the unifying state needed to increase its productive and military capabilities.<sup>6</sup>

Other arguments focused on the alleged corruption of rich charitable foundations. Both those charities administered by confraternities and those run by old Catholic noble families enjoyed ecclesiastical privileges and dispensed relief at their own discretion. The desire to abolish the corporate autonomy of charities and to place them under the control of government grew out of recognition that for all their wealth these institutions were not spending a large proportion of their incomes on alms. Enmity against the huge patrimonies of charities did not spare their governing bodies from charges of profligacy. As far as many liberal politicians were concerned, nuns, monks, priests, and philanthropists were a parasitic élite who lived lavishly off the parish contributions, the benefaction, and the returns on the investment of legacies which were not going to the poor.<sup>7</sup>

Excluding those still within Austrian and papal territories, charities numbered over 17,000 in existing 1861 lands and these institutions possessed an enviable fortune in properties and endowments. The wealth of *opere pie* tempted liberal politicians who wished to increase state revenue. The Piedmontese law of 22 May 1855 suppressed religious corporations and instituted a *cassa ecclesiastica* with the purpose of administering the estates which were confiscated by the state.<sup>8</sup> In the following decades, the abolition of the Church's feudal mortmain rights extended to new provinces as the nation

unified.<sup>9</sup>

The progressive removal of many of the exemptions which *opere pie* previously enjoyed meant that these institutions were taxed for the first time. The ecclesiastical establishment protested that the state was appropriating the "patrimony of the poor" in order to build roads and wage campaigns.<sup>10</sup> Italian parliamentarians justified their encroachments on Church property and privileges as a means to "nationalise" private wealth and release money for the benefit of public beneficence.<sup>11</sup> An enactment on 3 August 1862 prohibited Catholic clergy from "meddling" in the administration of charities which now fell under government control. The law conceded to municipalities and provinces the right to force the closure of those institutions such as seminaries which had a religious or educational purpose rather than a purely charitable one. And the legislation granted local governments the authority to appoint public officials to direct charities. In addition, private institutions were no longer able to withhold from government information on their incomes, expenditure, statutes, and functioning.<sup>12</sup>

The dissolution of monasteries, convents, confraternities, and congregations destroyed much of the charitable foundation of many of the nation's *opere pie*. The implementation of anti-clerical enactments also met with resistance by *opere pie*. The Interior Ministry published the initial results of the first comprehensive investigation of the functioning of the kingdom's *opere pie* in 1877. This inquiry revealed that over 3,000 *opere pie* did not keep regular accounts covering outgoing expenditure, over 2,000 did not record donations and legacies as part of their working budgets, and over 5,000 did not yet comply with rulings on taxation. Many evaded regulations on mandatory contributions to the state by diverting money into costly restoration work in order to pay lower income tax. Investigators judged the majority of the nation's *opere pie* to be inefficient and mismanaged institutions.<sup>13</sup>

In June 1880, another royal commission began to publish general surveys on the geographic distribution of charitable institutions. The results of this investigation worried reformers who wanted the nation to have a more uniform system of public services. The majority of Italy's 61 foundling homes were located in Tuscany, Lombardy, Piedmont and the Veneto. Piedmont, Sicily, Latium, and the Veneto possessed the

only refuges for unwed mothers, which numbered just 6. Over 87 percent of the kingdom's communes lacked a hospital and many poor municipalities lacked charitable institutions of any kind.<sup>14</sup>

Concern over the problem of the administration of charities grew because of these findings. Reformers believed the state had to take a more active role in the management of charities in order to promote their growth and efficiency. By 1889, however, 18 legislatures had dismissed reform proposals on financial grounds. The promulgation of Francesco Crispi's law of 17 July 1890 on public beneficence seemed to have appeased those sceptics who worried over what an administrative overhaul of *opere pie* would cost the Treasury. In the first parliamentary reading of the bill in November 1889, the Interior Minister had assured deputies that an increase in the authority of central government over *opere pie* would allow the state to untap a "national treasure of untold wealth". The state could better manage the money of charities, he argued, which would form the financial basis of the nation's system of *beneficenza pubblica*.<sup>15</sup>

Hailed by contemporaries as a progressive move forward for a modern state devoted to the "social renovation" of the nation, the 1890 act revealed that public beneficence was going to be much less munificent than Church charity had been before. The effect of the legislation was to reduce national private endowment and force parsimony on charities without substantially increasing state funding. The enactment consolidated efforts to create a central beneficent fund which offered discretionary grants to the institutions which paid taxes. Throughout the liberal period, however, less than two percent of state revenue was spent on public beneficence despite the tremendous capital influx from dispossessions of Church assets and taxation.<sup>16</sup> The state may have imposed some order on pious institutions by making their classification and registration mandatory, but the true distinction between public beneficence and private charity remained obscure.

#### ***Foundling Homes and Infant Welfare***

Throughout the liberal period, the responsibility of local government grew as the central state drew up statutory specifications for municipal and provincial budgets. From 1865 to 1898, successive local government acts required communes and provinces to share the cost for the provision of sanitation, intercity roads and railways, port facilities, the care of forests, and beneficence. According to

these rulings, expenditure on foundlings became compulsory, while spending on maternal refuges, hospitals, asylums, workhouses, and wetnurse agencies was purely facultative. Despite these efforts to unify public administration, much diversity in the amounts different local governments allotted to beneficent funding remained. Great geographic variation in the number and quality of relief institutions continued throughout the liberal period as a consequence.<sup>17</sup>

The increase in the financial burdens of local governments to care for abandoned children comprised the principal motive behind the spread of reformist ideas about foundling homes. Especially as efforts to close turnstiles began to show tangible results, authorities grew deeply concerned that the costs of public provision would progressively rise. By 1879, 506 of the 1,153 *ruote* which functioned in 1860 had been fitted with shutters. Those still open predominated in the South, where the Abruzzi and Molise, Campania, Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria, and Sicily possessed 586 of the 647 turnstiles in 1879. Between 1865 and 1879, 509,840 *trovatelli* had been found in turnstiles. In the same period, about 2,500 *esposti* were left each year in places like hospitals, city hall, churches, doorsteps, and roadsides. Added to this high number of abandoned babies, the nation's foundling homes, which were located in 27 provinces mainly in northern Italy, collected about 40,000 infants annually during those years.<sup>18</sup>

In response to such high levels of social dependency in a poor country, Italian reformers began to search for ways to decrease public responsibility for unwanted infants. The directors of foundling homes were at the forefront of a movement which advocated the active involvement of the unwed mother in the rearing of her child. In the autumn of 1880, the First International Congress on Public Beneficence took place in Milan. One of the foremost activists for foundling home reform in Italy, Decio Albinì believed that the prevention of abandonment should be the aim of the new public beneficence which was slowly emerging after centuries of Church control. Foundling homes encouraged immorality, he believed, by offering women the opportunity to dispose of their infants easily. They were the institutional expression of a society which did not care for its children, he argued at the convention. It was no longer morally acceptable, he asserted, to condemn infants to an "almost certain death" because they were born illegitimate. He referred to *ruote* as "little cemeteries" and looked

forward to time when they would all be closed down. Commonly called "*figli della carità*" or "*figli della madonna*", these infants, he stated, were really the "*figli della malvagità umana*": "victims of the wickedness of the mothers who abandon them, of the wetnurses who mistreat them, and of the institutions which neglect them". Public providers, he felt, had to begin to protect infant life by assuring that all babies had access to "*allevamento materno*".<sup>19</sup>

Romolo Griffini, director of the foundling home in Milan, endorsed this view and spared no criticism of the women who abandoned their babies. At the 1880 convention, he argued that public beneficence was really a question of public order. The Catholic Church, he charged, had been the unwed mothers' chief accomplice in a silent "massacre of the innocents". Rather than protect the woman from the shame of her unwed motherhood, a "more enlightened and provident lay beneficence", he argued, should try to care for the needs of illegitimate infants.<sup>20</sup>

Griffini made a number of recommendations to the foundling home directors who attended the congress. He believed that public providers should focus their energies and resources on increasing levels of maternal reclamation. In order to do this, foundling homes had to offer the unwed mother residential care and economic support in the form of monthly nursing stipends. The exact terms and the amount of the subsidies, he argued, should be left to the discretion of local authorities. They should be neither so small as to discourage women from caring for their infants nor so large as to encourage women to have more bastard babies. But to realise this plan, he admitted, meant that foundling home directors would have to destroy deeply ingrained attitudes about unwed motherhood. Unmarried mothers should no longer be able to protect their identity and deny their motherhood, he argued. He recommended that they be forced to make a declaration of maternity and that this verbal or written act should have the immediate legal effect of a formal reclamation.<sup>21</sup>

Griffini believed that harsher treatment of the unwed mother would act as a moral deterrent to bastardy. While enforced feeding of infants would reduce levels of death amongst illegitimate infants, mandatory reclamation would decrease the cost of public assistance. When put to the vote, this plan for the reorganisation of the foundling hospital received approval by members of the convention. Maternal declarations, they resolved, should be made obligatory;

details in such documentation would include the mother's name, family background, and proof of poverty and domicile.

Others also believed that public beneficence should become more conditional. As reformers confronted the problem of illegitimacy, they embarked on a path towards greater austerity in public provision. In early 1880, distinguished members of the medical community met in Turin for the Third International Congress on Hygiene. These authorities recognised too the economic advantages of an enforced engagement of unwed mothers in child rearing. Antonio Agostini, who directed the foundling home in Verona, spoke about the need to restrict social assistance to the most needy. He mentioned the fact that many legitimate infants were also abandoned in *ruote* and foundling homes. The reformer professed his moral outrage that uncar- ing parents should be allowed to "impose death sentences on their own children". Along with measures to prohibit married couples from taking advantage of the public purse, foundling homes, he warned, should also impose strict qualification criteria on the women to whom they granted maintenance. Only the "most wretched and poor" women should be entitled to support under the new regime.<sup>22</sup>

These reformers proposed a number of important changes to the system of foundling aid. They believed the state should care for *riconosciuti*, who fell outside the bounds of statutory public beneficence, and aimed to ensure that mothers complied with their plans. They advocated that foundling homes should be recast into residential care facilities for mothers and their infants. They saw these reorganised institutions as the means by which they could rehabilitate the fallen woman by forcing her to accept responsibility for the welfare of her own child. In exchange for refuge and support, these women would be enlisted as "internal feeders" who nursed not only their own children, but also other foundlings. They upheld a strong belief in maternal reclamation as a spiritual reconquest of the *peccatrice* and as a moral deterrent in society. They justified the controls they wished to implement as a progressive move towards a "social regeneration" through a reformation of "barbaric" attitudes towards children. By uncovering the unmarried mother, they aimed to decrease not only abandonment, but also abortion and infanticide too. The horrible shame and secrecy of extramarital pregnancy, they argued, caused a woman to commit child murder in order to protect her



"honour".<sup>23</sup>

### *Public Authorities and Wetrnursing*

Infant mortality in Italy was estimated to be somewhere between 20 and 25 percent for legitimate infants under the age of one.<sup>24</sup> Though more unreliable, statistical evidence on illegitimates suggested that the mortality of these infants was at least double that for legitimates.<sup>25</sup> The social conditions of care would advise in favour of a pessimistic appraisal of the life chances of children reared publicly. In 1895, national newspapers picked up on a public scandal taking place at the third oldest foundling home in Italy, the Saint Mary of the Annunciation in Naples. Of the 856 infants which the home had farmed out in 1894, authorities discovered only 3 to be still alive by the following year. An official inquiry commenced and the home converted to the new system of requiring mothers to nurse their own babies. An independent investigation carried out by a journalist revealed that wetnurses had not been paid in months, that babies had been given over to them nude and malnourished, and that the home had no internal medical facilities or staff for health visits. Despite these revelations, public debate focused on the evils of wetnursing which was responsible for the tragedy of "*novecento cadaverini*".<sup>26</sup>

Representative of this new outlook on infant life protection, a public health official in Milan condemned unwed mothers of the "double crime" of getting pregnant out of wedlock and of deserting their infants. Angelo Valdameri thought that mothers who left their babies in the hands of "mercenary feeders" were more morally depraved than prostitutes. He believed that wetnurses were "corrupt and venal" and the foundling trade the "most nauseating and filthy around". Because of their appalling ignorance, he maintained, wetnurses lacked "even an elementary understanding of infant hygiene".<sup>27</sup>

In the spring of 1899, hundreds of the nation's physicians and public authorities convened in Milan to discuss wetnursing. At the First National Congress for the Hygiene of Mercenary Feeding, the view of the wetnurse as an ignorant and neglectful rearer prevailed over discussion. Left to their own devices, wetnurses, one home director stated, willfully failed to make foundlings thrive. Because they suckled their own children first, he alleged, paid feeders deprived foundlings of adequate nourishment. He went on to draw a profile of the wetnurse as a superstitious and conniving villain. When dry from

her own malnourishment or over-feeding, the *nutrice* resorted to "artificial" milk substitutes which were noxious. The farinose *pappa*, a mixture of cow's or goat's milk with wheat flour or bread soaked in water, then baked or boiled, served to "procure for the poor creature a case of gastro-enteric disorder". Too sticky and dense for delicate digestive tracts, the mealy gruel, he argued, caused constipation which could be fatal for newborns. To make matters worse, the *balia* resorted to home-made laxatives to cleanse the child. The woman relied on folklore and prayer to heal the moribund infant, but called a doctor only *in extremis*. Cunning and unscrupulous, this peasant woman then went on to conceal the child's death from the foundling home's authorities in order to continue in their employ. The *balia* borrowed a neighbour's baby on pay day, and collected her monthly wage for the cost of childcare.<sup>28</sup>

Other charges against wetnurses included "speculation" and illegal registration with municipal authorities who were responsible for certification. Reform advocates believed that many *balie* registered in more than one commune, collected a number of foundlings, and set up "farms" where children were kept in squalid conditions.<sup>29</sup> Foundling home administrators also asserted that an illicit traffic in unwanted infants was taking place on a large scale. According to them, "disreputable" wetnurses, or those struck off the list of municipal registers because they had syphilis or were old, engaged in a widespread commercial trade in infants with the help of *mandarine* who worked as agents for homes. Acting as intermediaries between the foundling hospital and the wetnurses, *mandarine* arranged contracts and transported babies to the countryside. Probably retired wetnurses themselves, these women, authorities felt, made private arrangements with women through midwives, and contacts in bordellos and maternity wards. Reformers held the system of *madarinaggio* responsible for the spread of syphilis and the death of an untold number of infants at the hands of child-murdering farmers.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the seriousness of these allegations, however, the directors of foundling homes and municipal authorities remained very lax with regard to the regulation of wetnursing. Parliament too appeared to be entirely disinterested in this social problem, as no formal inquiry into baby-farming was ever called.<sup>31</sup> The state proved reluctant to channel funds into improvements in the running of

municipal agencies involved in health and sanitation, and officials in charge of supervising wetnursing simply did not have the resources needed to apply checks. According to procedure, no wetnurse could be hired if a high percentage of her own children had died or if she were still nursing her own child. But wetnursing, as commentators were well aware, was a significant occupation for rural women, provided peasant families with a regular income, and involved the poorest strata of the agricultural population.

Women sold their milk because they were forced to earn extra money for their own families. Wetnursing exploited the numerous opportunities for the engagement of women in badly paid by-employments which the rural setting provided. The legal and illegal commerce in infants was inextricably bound up with the demographic structure of rural Italy. Functional precisely because of high female fertility, wetnursing may have contributed to high infant mortality in the countryside by forcing the most destitute of families to spread limited resources too thinly. In making their accusation that wetnurses destroyed their source of income by wilfully killing off babies, reformers neglected to consider the social context within which the trade flourished. High general infant mortality in rural Italy was tied to the periodic cycle of food scarcity, poverty, hunger, and disease which followed seasonal agricultural rhythms.<sup>32</sup> The heavy migration of infants from towns to the country almost certainly strained already precariously balanced rural communities.

Reformers also failed to put into perspective how the system actually worked. Foundling homes experienced regular wetnurse shortages due to shifting seasonal labour supply. During times when women worked the fields, authorities encountered great difficulty finding places for their infants. Because homes were not equipped to be residential institutions for long-term care, authorities were forced to be much less selective than they should have been.<sup>33</sup>

Foundling home and municipal health authorities did not make a wetnurse's job any easier. Although they were public employees, women were badly paid. Contracts varied enormously from one township to another, but generally authorities made no provision for any medical expenses for childcare. While municipalities and foundling homes stopped payments to sick wetnurses and those with sick babies on their hands, very few indeed provided any additional benefit such as

medicine, special emergency subsidies, food packets, or even infant necessities, like clothing and bedding.<sup>34</sup> Though an essential part of the entire welfare system, paid feeders had to make do with a pittance even in times of great hardship. Wages remained notoriously small given social demand and a fluctuating market.

By their own admission, foundling homes undervalued and underpaid the public service performed by wetnurses. Government enquiries after 1898 disclosed that some authorities accumulated huge backlogs in their payments of wetnurse subsidies. Account entries in many homes, like those in Milan, Bergamo, and Turin for example, showed wetnurses' wages regularly fell in arrears, and in some cases by as much as a full year or more.<sup>35</sup> The amount of the subsidy varied greatly, but, on the whole, women in northern and central Italy enjoyed better pay. From a maximum of 15 *lire* a month, reported in provinces like Ravenna and Bergamo, wages descended to a minimum of 4 per month in Teramo and other southern provinces. And the duration of the contract differed. Limited to one year at Naples, Trapani, Catania, Messina, Palermo, and other localities where authorities restricted wetnurse funding, the contract exceeded the normal three year period in only a few areas. Mainly the richer northern authorities furnished some form of direct economic aid and supplementary support beyond the mere provision of a meagre subsidy: the Turin home gave out premiums to wetnurses with good records of reliable service; others, like those in Rovigo, Brescia, and Padova extended subsidies on a declining scale for up to 12 to 14 years; some, like those in Bologna, Pavia, Verona, and Forlì issued educational grants to foundlings once they reached adolescence; and, a few distributed occasional marriage premiums to foundlings raised in orphanages.<sup>36</sup>

On balance, the complaints of reformers reflected real weaknesses within the system of foundling aid. Foundling home directors recognised that they had little control over wetnursing. In 1892, 7,381 children who had been kept on by wetnurses were removed from their homes because of mistreatment and abuse. At the turn of the century, *medici condotti* in Vicenza, who performed home visits to the homes of *balie*, discovered babies with scrofula and rickets, and others mysteriously absent though wetnurses had continued to collect subsidies. In a number of provinces, inspections revealed that infants had been given over to women with pellagra and tuberculosis. And other

investigators reported that children who had stayed on with wetnurses were found to be illiterate, battered, exploited as farm labour, and generally "treated as animals". Some foundling homes did hire their own health visitors, but most did not. The job of home visits fell upon already overworked municipal doctors. In Naples, the *condotto* in charge of the wetnursing circuit was meant to carry out monthly checks on over 15,000 infants dispersed throughout the province.<sup>37</sup>

The Italian parliament chose to ignore the cries of reformers about the evils of the *ballatico* and did not promulgate health norms regulating the practice of wetnursing until August 1918.<sup>38</sup> It has to be said, however, that foundling homes hardly set elevated standards for the humane treatment of children either. Although reform advocates criticised wetnurses for being ignorant and negligent, they failed to offer infants a better chance of survival than *balie* did.

#### *Foundling Homes*

The nation's *brefotrofi* were places where foundlings died. According to government statistics, the average rate of infant mortality within foundling homes was between 80 and 100 percent. As many were mediaeval convents, they were not designed to provide comfort and few had any of the amenities considered to be basic necessities by nineteenth-century standards. A government investigation completed in 1900 judged all of the nation's 121 foundling homes to be unacceptable for a whole number of reasons. Inspectors reported that the overwhelming majority of institutions were unclean, unsafe, ill-equipped, and unfit for infant life. Some lacked heating altogether, others drinking water, windows, and lighting; at Spoleto, Orvieto, and Gubbio, cribs were found to be without mattresses; at Faenza and Lucca, they discovered half-naked infants crying, unattended, and covered in their own excrement. Only 13 institutions made the regular bathing of infants routine procedure. In other cities, examiners found living conditions cramped as six or more babies were forced to share the same bed and bottle. In Turin and Naples, inspectors discovered nuns feeding newborns pre-masticated solid food and spotted sickly infants lying amongst those apparently still well.<sup>39</sup>

Foundling homes were supposed to function as hospitals where sick *ritornelli*, those infants returned to authorities by wetnurses, could receive treatment. And they functioned too as institutions for the

care of infants until a wetnurse could be found, which sometimes took months. Inspectors reported that medical facilities, including basic provision for separate wards to isolate the ill, were virtually non-existent. Only one *brefotrofi* in the kingdom possessed an incubator for the care of premature infants. Inspections revealed that institutions which had declared that they made adequate provision for the preparation of milk did not in fact do so. Staff left milk standing for hours on end and passed bottles from one infant to the next. Only a handful had been found to regularly boil milk before use; and only one owned a proper steriliser. Given these conditions, infections and diseases spread rapidly through foundling homes.<sup>40</sup>

In defending their poor record on infant mortality, foundling home directors claimed that most infants who were left with them were weak, underweight, premature, and malnourished. The journey from the countryside to the town where most foundling homes were located could take up to a week. Those who brought the infants exposed them to horrible privations, bad weather, and insufficient food. Authorities complained that infants arrived in a frail state, failed to thrive, and were destined to die.<sup>41</sup>

In liberal Italy, the life chances of a foundling were very low. Neither homes nor wetnurses offered much hope for survival. New attitudes towards children may have emerged but the whole foundling home system proved resistant to change. Only a few decades before the turn of the century, infants reared in *brefotrofi* were regularly suckled at the teats of goats and donkeys. Some doctors actually advised that all infants should be nursed in this manner since animals were not subject to the emotions which might sour milk.<sup>42</sup> Those who wished to reform public beneficence came to see mother's milk as the solution to the problem of how to care for foundlings. Their efforts to enforce the creed of responsible unwed motherhood is the subject of the following chapter.

## Endnotes

- 1 F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London, 1974), pp. 703-4.
- 2 See G. Da Moulin, "Les enfants abandonnes dans les villes Italiennes aux XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siecles", *Annales de démographie historique* (1983), 103-23.
- 3 *I cosiddetti illegittimi: Atti del Convegno Nazionale sui nuovi orientamenti dell'assistenza ai cosiddetti 'illegittimi'* (Rome, 1963), p. 153; and on the beginnings of the reform movement, see Romolo Griffini's *Relazione sul Sesto Congresso Medico Italiano (tenutosi a Bologna nel settembre 1874)*, published by the Comitato Milanese dell'Associazione Medica Italiana, (Milan, 1875), pp. 14-21.
- 4 D. H. Farmer, *The Oxford Book of Saints* (Oxford, 1978), p. 366; *I cosiddetti illegittimi*, p. 153. ApC, XVII Legis., Sess. 1890-1892, Tornata of 26 January 1891, discussion of the bill presented by Tullio Minelli, on "esposti". Another major reform proposal included a *disegno* on the "infamy of baby-farming", presented on 31 January 1893, which was entitled "Sulla protezione dei bambini lattanti e della infanzia abbandonata", in ApC, Legis. XVIII, Sess. 1892-1893, Documenti; and the accompanying "Relazione della commissione composta dei deputati sulla proposta di legge", in *Ibid.*, Relazioni, Seduta 7 July 1893. The bill fell in its second reading. And on 22 November 1877, Giovanni Nicotera had presented to the Chamber a bill on the reform of foundling homes, "Sul mantenimento dei fanciulli illegittimi e abbandonati", which fell without a discussion.
- 5 D. Albin, *La questione degli esposti in Basilicata* (Rome, 1895), pp. 14-5.
- 6 See F. Nitti, *L'assistenza pubblica in Italia: L'azione della chiesa e l'azione dello stato* (Trani, 1892), pp. 15-6.
- 7 See E. Martinengo Cesaresco, *Cavour* (Reprint of 1898 edition, London, 1970), pp. 95-103; and J. A. Davis, *Conflict and Control*, pp. 144; 167-70.
- 8 P. Castiglioni, *Le opere pie del Regno D'Italia secondo la statistica del 1861* (Rome, 1873), pp. 10-7 and 16-7; and on the legislation, G. D'Amelia, *Stato e Chiesa: la legislazione ecclesiastica fino al 1867* (Milan, 1967), 57-9.
- 9 D. Mack Smith, *Italy: A Modern History* (London, 1959), pp. 87-8; 90-1.
- 10 Anon., "Il Congresso di Beneficenza", *Civiltà Cattolica*, IV (1880), pp. 5-17.
- 11 S. Cilibrizzi, *Storia parlamentare, politica e diplomatica d'Italia, 1870-1896*, II (Milan, 1925), pp. 57-9.

- 12 D'Amelia, *Stato e Chiesa*, pp. 428-48.
- 13 Min. Interno, CR, Inchiesta sulle opere pie, *Statistica delle opere pie e delle spese di beneficenza sostenute dai comuni e dalle provincie*, I (Rome, 1886), pp. 1-4 on the 1877 inquest; and on the effects in Sicily, see *L'inchiesta sulle condizioni sociali ed economiche della Sicilia, 1875-1876*, S. Carbone and R. Crispo, eds., II (Rome, 1963), especially pp. 571-3; 1045-71.
- 14 Ibid., Inchiesta sulle opere pie, 12 Vols. (Rome, 1884-1897); see the *Relazione A. S. E. Il Presidente del Consiglio Ministro dell'Interno sui Lavori della Commissione* (Rome, 1884), pp. 6-12.
- 15 Camera dei Deputati, *Discorsi parlamentari di Francesco Crispi*, III (Rome, 1915), pp. 388-408; 409.
- 16 See L. Izzo, *La finanza pubblica nel primo decennio dell'unit  italiana* (Milan, 1962), pp. 23-44; and see, Camera dei Deputati, *L'attivit  parlamentare dei socialisti italiani, 1900-1904*, II (Rome, 1970), pp. 446-8. And on the 1890 law, see D. Preti, *Economia e istituzioni nello stato fascista*, pp. 207-15.
- 17 Camera dei Deputati, *Discorsi parlamentari di Giovanni Giolitti*, II (Rome, 1953), pp. 684-5 on a proposal to reform the law, entitled "Istituzioni di Beneficenza", which was discussed by the Senate on 27 December 1901; Nitti, *L'assistenza pubblica in Italia*, p. 18.
- 18 Min. AIC, *Statistica della assistenza dell'infanzia abbandonata* (Rome, 1894), pp. 3-6, for a national and provincial breakdown of abandonment rates.
- 19 D. Albin, "I brefotrofi nella forma attualmente esistente", *Relazione al Congresso Internazionale di Beneficenza in Milano*, a copy found in IPAlI (see bibliography for details of this holding), but also published in *Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Milano* (Rome, 1880).
- 20 R. Griffini, "La beneficenza avente carattere e rapporti di ordine pubblico", *Relazione al Congresso Internazionale di Beneficenza*, found in IPAlI.
- 21 Ibid.; and on attitudes towards unwed mothers, see G. Pomata, "Madri illegittimi tra ottocento e novecento: storie cliniche e storie di vita", *Quaderni Storici*, XXXXIIII (1980), pp. 497-543.
- 22 A. Agostini, "Dal governo degli esposti", *Giornale della Societ  Italiana d'Igiene*, VI (1880), pp. 12-4
- 23 E. Raseri, "Sui provvedimenti a favore della infanzia", *Annali di Statistica*, Serie III, XII (Rome, 1884), p. 215; and on attitudes towards women and infanticide, see, A. Stoppato, *Infanticidio e procurato aborto: Studio di dottrina, legislazione e giurisprudenza penale* (Verona, 1887), especially pp. 24-5; and his *Diritto penale*, (Milano, 1887), p. 151 on the



"moral" causes of infanticide.

- 24 Min. AIC, *Statistica delle cause delle morti: Anno 1881* (Rome, 1882), p. 35; and *Statistica delle cause di morte nell'anno 1907* (Rome, 1909), p. xlvii.
- 25 Ibid., both volumes; and *Statistica delle cause di morte nell'anno 1909* (Rome, 1912), table on p. xxx.
- 26 ACS, Min. Interno, Serie Diverse, R. Commissione d'Inchiesta per Napoli, 1899-1902, p. 22, opere pie, f. 5, Brefotrofio dell'Annunziata, 1865; and copy of newspaper article, "Una visita al Brefotrofio dell'Annunziata", from *La Colonna*, 13 March 1898.
- 27 A. Valdameri, "Allattamento artificiale ed il latte sterilizzato-considerazioni-proposte: Comunicazione fatta all'Associazione Sanitaria Milanese nella seduta del 13 Maggio 1890", *Bollettino dell'Associazione Sanitaria Milanese* (1899), p.157-60.
- 28 "Verballi del Primo Congresso Nazionale per la Igiene dell'Allattamento Mercenario," *Pro Infanzia: Bollettino Ufficiale della Pia Istituzione Provvidenza Ballatica*, no. 1, I (November, 1898), pp. 1-9; and A. Talini, "Bisogna sorvegliare l'allattamento dei bambini affidati a nutrici mercenarie in campagna", in Ibid., pp. 9-10; and a continuation of Talini's article in the next issue, (December, 1898), pp. 13-15. Talini made reference to "intestinal atresia" and attributed this disease to the ignorance of wetnurses. Foundling home authorities, however, reported a high incidence of "digestive disorders", and doctors also treated such blockages with forced irrigation, which led to diarrhoea, a major killer of newborns. For figures on infant deaths due to "gastro-intestinal" diseases, see ISTAT, *Statistica delle cause delle morte per l'anno 1918* (Rome, 1924), p.xxxv.
- 29 E. Raseri, "I fanciulli illegittimi e gli esposti in Italia", *Archivio di Statistica*, no. 2, VI (Rome, 1881), pp. 5-24; and see E. Grassi, *Relazione per l'anno 1898 sull'ospizio provinciale di Milano* (Milan, 1898), *passim*. Blasi believed that wetnurses could get away with substituting babies because foundling homes made no attempt to identify them (finger-printing did not come into effect until the 1920s); and they did not keep accurate records of the movement of foundlings.
- 30 D. Albinì, *La questione degli esposti ed il Brefotrofio di Roma* (Rome, 1897), pp. 21-3; and P. Blasi, *Relazione sul funzionamento del Brefotrofio di Roma al deputato amministrativo* (Rome, 1900), pp. 4-5.
- 31 See the copy of an open letter to Luigi Pelloux in V. Colombo, "L'Esposizione d'igiene infantile," *Pro Infanzia*, no. 4, III (February, 1900), p.6-7.
- 32 G. Da Molin, *L'infanzia abbandonata in Italia in età moderna:*

- Aspetti demografici di un problema sociale* (Bari, 1981), pp. 56-9.
- 33 M. Mauri, *Relazione del Brefotrofito di Roma, 1904-1905* (Rome, 1906), pp. 11-6.
- 34 P. Ramazzotti, *Profilassi della sifilide da allattamento: Relazione fatta al Primo Congresso Nazionale per l'Igiene dell'Allattamento Mercenario* (Milan, 1899), pp. 4-5; 7-8; 21-2; on treatment of siphilitic wetnurses.
- 35 *Statistica della assistenza dell'infanzia abbandonata* (Rome, 1894), p.12 on wetnurse wages.
- 36 Min. AIC, *Statistica delle cause di morte nel 1886* (Rome, 1888), appendix, pp. 81-9.
- 37 Min. AIC, *Statistica delle cause di morte nell'anno 1905* (Rome, 1906), p. 4; and on visits in Naples, Min. Interno, CR, *Inchiesta sui brefotrofi e studi di legislazione comparata sui provvedimenti per l'assistenza della infanzia abbandonata* (Rome, 1900), p. 44.
- 38 For details on the Decreto Luogotenenziale of 4 August 1918 and its Ordinamento of 6 June 1919, see the copy of the circular from the Health Ministry about the legislation in "Documenti ufficiali", *MI*, VI (June, 1931), pp. 567-8.
- 39 *Inchiesta sui brefotrofi e studi di legislazione comparata sui provvedimenti per l'assistenza della infanzia abbandonata*, pp. 21-2; 34-5; 39.
- 40 *Ibid.*, pp. 40; 44; 56; and see A. Morricone, "Cenni storici sulla evoluzione dell'assistenza al bambino prematuro", *Pagine della Storia della Medicina*, V (March/April, 1961), pp. 37-44, on the belated use of incubators in Italy.
- 41 *Ibid.*, pp. 19-21.
- 42 See the extraordinary medical debate about the advantages of animals' milk over mothers' milk, outlined in the volume by Prof. Alliprandi (no first name given), *Trattato elementare di ostetricia* (Turin, 1860), pp. 239-47; and compare this to the arguments in favour of *allattamento materno* in L. Bordè, *La protezione delle gravide in rapporto alla puericoltura e l'allevamento degli esposti* (Bologna, 1898).

### **Unwed Mothers and Foundling Home Reform**

The progressive abolition of the turnstile in Italy caused chaos. The 1900 inquest revealed that many foundling home authorities believed that they would be inundated with abandoned babies in the aftermath of turnstile closures. Many provinces were still without *brefotrofi*, so welfare reformers feared that infanticide and abortion would rise as the Christian apparatus of charity slowly disappeared. Because of the lack of any central government policy or legislation on illegitimates, efforts to reorganise foundling homes proceeded very erratically. An uneven pattern of progress emerged as one consequence of the failure of the state to coordinate reform initiatives nationally. While some authorities began to alter the terms of public beneficence by involving unwed mothers in the care of infants, others stuck tenaciously to the old *ruota* regime. As a result, the impact of the reform movement accentuated regional differences in the rate of social development. The South as a whole failed to capture the momentum of change and became a region marked by chronically high levels of child abandonment and stubbornly low levels of maternal reclamation. But in those regions where reform gradually took off, the new system of arrangements for foundling relief had a dramatic effect on single mothers. This chapter explores the varied attempts by public authorities throughout the nation to prevent abandonment.

#### ***The Southern Problem***

Turnstile abolition progressed rapidly throughout northern and central regions. By the end of the nineteenth century, only a few provinces appeared resistant to change. In addition, many more foundling home directors began to change policy on admissions after 1880. Attempts to force maternal declarations and reclamations became increasingly widespread. In answer to questionnaires distributed nationally, some foundling home authorities did provide strong arguments outlining reasons why they chose not to implement initiatives to uncover the unwed mother. Those in Piacenza, Genoa, Orvieto, Siena, Arezzo, and Florence believed abandonment and infanticide would increase if they put pressure on women to divulge their identity. The director of the foundling home in Parma objected to maternal declarations on legal grounds, and stated that so long as their legality remained in doubt, he would not make women reclaim

their infants. In Fano and Jesi, officials feared suicides would rise if they attempted to trace mothers. And others felt that obligatory reclamations would disgrace families and jeopardise the marriage prospects of unwed mothers.<sup>1</sup>

But on the whole, public authorities in northern and central regions embraced the new creed of responsible unwed motherhood. In the South, by contrast, they resisted change. The responses of southern authorities to government inquiries all focused on how different customs were in the *mezzogiorno* where attitudes about female chastity and family honour remained backward. In Palermo and Catania, authorities believed that women would murder their infants rather than risk exposure as unwed mothers. The stigma attached to unwed motherhood was still so strong, they argued, that maternal declarations would cause public order to crumble. Fathers would kill their daughters, and brothers would kill their sister's "seducers". In an already violent society, crimes associated with vendetta would increase, they believed, as would abortion and infanticide. Mainland southern authorities in Campania and Calabria shared the anxieties of their Sicilian colleagues. In Naples and Catanzaro too, officials feared women would be subjected to rituals of public humiliation, banishment, and murder.<sup>2</sup>

Another obstacle to change was the relative paucity of institutions dispensing foundling relief in the South. The *mezzogiorno* possessed only 15 of the nation's 121 foundling homes in 1900.<sup>3</sup> In Italy as a whole, 2,240 municipalities out of 8,269 had some form of wetnurse registration and placement agency by the turn of the century, but very few of these were found in the South; only Bari, Lecce, Potenza, Caltanissetta, Cagliari, Campobasso, and Sassari had these communal facilities. Some townships created inter-communal agencies where babies could be left; four of these services existed in the Abruzzi, four in Molise, two in Calabria, and four in Sicily. In contrast, the number of functioning *ruota* in southern regions remained very high. Of the kingdom's 464 open turnstiles in 1906, 427 were located in the *mezzogiorno*.<sup>4</sup> The South remained a stronghold for church charity partly because of the failure of local authorities to create any institutional alternatives to the wheel.

Some foundling home authorities in the South did attempt to implement new restrictive controls. In Palermo, *brefotrofito* officials

sought to bring infant mortality down by requiring unwed mothers to breast-feed their infants for a minimum period of three months as a condition of aid. Officials there opened a mothers' shelter in 1898 where women were housed during their confinement as feeders. They kept mothers busy in a domestic routine which involved the sewing of baby clothes in workrooms supervised by nuns. Authorities did stop short of making reclamation obligatory, however.<sup>5</sup>

Although southern foundling home authorities were reluctant to force women to reclaim, they did attempt to impose new limits on the numbers of infants they admitted. The directors of *brefotrofi* in Messina, Caltanissetta, Trapani, Girgenti, and Siracusa focused on reducing the levels of abandonment of legitimate infants. Married peasant women relinquished their infants to foundling homes one day, officials believed, and offered their services as wetnurses the next. Apparently this was evident to authorities because wetnurses singled out particular infants, this practice seemed to them to be fairly widespread. Relying on support from midwives, who had contact with civil registration offices, the system worked to the exasperation of foundling home authorities because they realised that false documentation alleging illegitimacy was still easily obtainable. Many foundling homes in the past had made provision in their governing statutes for poor families to leave their children for short spells during times of famine, but this custom was rapidly disappearing throughout the nation.<sup>6</sup>

In Messina, authorities realised that if they could provide free shelter for unwed women up to birth, they might be able to reduce abandonment. After 1897, the provincial foundling home annexed a maternity ward where women received free medical attendance at birth. The purpose of this innovation was to gain access to the woman at the birth of her child when she was most vulnerable to the "subtle persuasion" of nuns who brought the baby to her breast. Medical opinion held that once a woman breast-fed, she was well on her way to "recovering" her maternal instinct and would be unable to part with the infant. In this instance, however, the plan backfired because women shied away from the charity hospital.<sup>7</sup>

On balance, the accomplishments of southern reform operations were mixed. Some authorities believed that conditions had become slightly better within foundling homes by the turn of the century. Illegi-

timate mortality levels did appear to be decreasing though they remained very high indeed.<sup>9</sup> It seems, however, that the main impulse behind the decline in the mortality of foundlings was the fall in illegitimate fertility after 1880.<sup>9</sup> In the decades after 1880, foundling home authorities witnessed a slight increase in the numbers of infants raised at their expense. But, the numbers of infants brought to municipal wetnurse bureaux did experience a sharp decline after 1880, and dropped by almost sixty percent by 1906.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps efforts to prevent abandonment may have had some limited impact. But, whether this trend was attributable to the long-term decline in abandonment, or, more significantly, to the clampdown on legitimate abandonment is impossible to deduce from the sources.<sup>11</sup>

The conditions of care for foundlings remained grim. One index for assessing how much was done to improve the survival chances of illegitimate infants was the volume of public expenditure. With the exception of Sicily, southern authorities invested very little money in foundlings. Emilia, Lombardy, Sicily, and Piedmont each spent on average 139 *lire* per foundling. The cost of child maintenance in Apulia, Basilicata, and Calabria, however, averaged between 60 and 70 *lire* a year.<sup>12</sup>

Abandonment continued to be a big problem in Italy. The national rate stood at 2.3 percent in the first decade of the twentieth century. Regional differences in abandonment levels, however, were very pronounced. Whereas between 1.8 and 1.9 percent of all infants born in Lombardy and Piedmont were abandoned, over 3.2 percent of newborns in Sicily were left as foundlings. And, although gradually decreasing, the absolute level of abandonment in Calabria was the highest in the nation at just over 3.9 percent of all livebirths. In aggregate terms, the nation produced about 25,000 unwanted infants a year and almost half of these were abandoned in southern regions.<sup>13</sup>

With 126 of the 464 functioning *ruote* in 1906, Sicily stood out as a region with an enormous abandonment problem. Almost 60 percent of all infants left at the turnstile and just under 20 percent of all infants left at foundling homes in Italy were Sicilian.<sup>14</sup> Abandonment in the South was a symptom of social and economic backwardness that liberalism failed to redress. In the *mezzogiorno*, the "archaic" turnstile remained in place despite efforts to introduce "modern" institutional alternatives.

### ***Reform Efforts in the North***

In Liguria, the Veneto, Piedmont, and Lombardy, municipalities closed all remaining turnstiles by 1884. By 1893, authorities dismantled the 12 surviving wheels in Emilia; and, by the turn of the century, only a handful of these remnants still functioned in Tuscany, the Marches, and Umbria.<sup>16</sup> More efficient local government perhaps distinguished the achievements of northern regions from the shortcomings of beneficent reform in the south.

Easing the efforts of foundling home reform, *brefotrofi* in northern and central regions were placed under local government control. By deliberation of individual provincial delegations throughout the earlier overhaul of the *opere pie*, the direction of most homes had fallen to public officials as ecclesiastical and lay governing bodies were removed. By the 1870s, municipalities and provinces together appointed officials to manage foundling homes.<sup>16</sup> The dissolution of charitable orders, however, deprived foundling homes of their endowments and many fell into debt. Together with the failure of local governments to invest sufficiently in beneficent funding, financial considerations spurred attempts to reorganise homes.

In some areas, foundling home reform brought tangible improvements to the quality of care, despite financial obstacles. The small hospice in Viterbo saw its income drop drastically in the wake of state incursions on the Church. By 1875, the home's authorities decided to restrict entries to only verified illegitimates whose mothers could not be traced as married women. The sizable reduction in the number of admissions allowed authorities to channel resources into refurbishment. Internal reorganisation involved the extension of buildings and the creation of a proper nursery for infants. Other improvements included the hiring of a nurse to make up for the lack of a full-time doctor on staff. In addition to wetnurse subsidies, the home began to distribute food hand-outs to needy *balie*. These changes seemed to have had a favourable impact as authorities claimed that infant mortality fell considerably in the following two decades.<sup>17</sup>

Not all homes were as well-equipped as that in Viterbo to maintain infants in comparatively decent conditions. Quite unique in organisation, the Viterbo hospital was annexed to an orphanage run by a branch of the sisterhood of Mount Calvary. The nuns raised the foundlings who were returned from the countryside. The foundling home

authorities shortened wetnursing contracts to four years after 1875 in order to save on costs. The nuns helped to manage finances by taking a percentage of the goods sold through the institution's sewing and artisanal shops.<sup>18</sup>

The reform route taken by authorities in Viterbo proved to be the exception. Increasingly, foundling home officials chose to limit unconditional access to relief to *ignoti*, those infants declared children of "unknown parents" in civil registration proceedings. And they sought to increase levels of reclamation as part of the plan to decrease public responsibility for care. In the Veneto, the foundling home in Rovigo was long considered to be a model institution. In 1877, authorities had started to offer unwed mothers nursing subsidies. The policy change, however, had not resulted in reduced rates of abandonment. So from 1888, officials introduced maternity declarations as a condition of care. Authorities imposed strict observance of rulings on domicile and poverty and refused to allow entry to children born outside their administrative jurisdiction. The home also began to carry out *ricerche della maternità* to determine whether unwed mothers qualified for assistance. Authorities employed new staff to investigate each claimant's eligibility at competent municipal public records offices. When presenting their babies, mothers were required to bring along documentation which included a certificate of poverty, a doctor's assessment of ability to breast-feed, a character reference from a priest or some other person, and proof of residence and civil status. Additionally, in return for the small monthly stipend, given for a shorter period than those for wetnurses, successful applicants were bound to nurse their infants for a minimum six month period.<sup>19</sup>

The only noticeable outcome of greater strictness in Rovigo seemed to be a slight decrease in the number of foundlings raised with public funds. In the five years from 1893 to 1897, illegitimates figured at 887 in the province's registry, but only 711 of these infants were surrendered to the foundling home. The prospect of formal application and bureaucratic controls on admissions may have proved intimidating enough to scare some women off subsidised childrearing. The home's own record of reclamation, however, did not improve during this period, a significant reminder that the stigma of unwed motherhood would not disappear overnight. The meagreness and provisory nature of the subsidy system too may have persuaded some women to make private arrange-



ments for the disposal of their infants. As "known" cases of infanticide did not increase, unmarried women may have farmed out infants independently.<sup>20</sup>

Foundling home authorities in Milan, Como, Verona, Turin, and elsewhere, did manage to bring expenditure down when new restrictive qualifications came into effect.<sup>21</sup> Previous to reform, some homes, like those in Rome and Milan, did seek documentation from municipal registry offices to prove whether the child was truly illegitimate.<sup>22</sup> The *brefotrofia* of Saint Catherine in Milan began to limit aid to *esposti* in 1868, but not until 1887 did they make unwed mothers breast-feed their infants as a condition of care.<sup>23</sup> In 1877, the foundling home of the Holy Spirit in Rome began limiting admissions of legitimate infants to only those whose mothers had died or whose fathers were in prison; by the early part of the next decade, the hospital authorities determined to further restrict entries to *esposti* only.<sup>24</sup> By the end of the century, both establishments had significantly cut by over a quarter the number of their annual admissions.<sup>25</sup>

The trend towards restrictive qualification increasingly evidenced as the century progressed received formal sanction. On 28 October 1882, the Council of State decided to grant foundling homes the right to set their own standards for admissions policy. They could now decide for themselves what categories of infants qualified for aid.<sup>26</sup> But the practice of maternity declarations did not receive authorisation. The 1865 Civil Code and the 1889 Penal Code both guaranteed the right of unwed mothers to withhold their signature on birth certificates and civil registration acts.<sup>27</sup> To force women to reclaim their infants was illegal. The attempt by foundling home authorities to bind women to breast-feed was admissible so long as the unwed mother's right to confidentiality was not violated. These legal constraints put authorities in the difficult position of trying to increase reclamations without breaking the law.

### ***Maternal Shelters***

Foundling home authorities came to see the early recovery of the woman as a solution to their problem. They believed that as much as 97 percent of unmarried women who gave birth at home abandoned their infants. If they could reach her at birth, they argued, they would be able to exert the subtle pressure needed to make her accept her

responsibility.<sup>28</sup> What authorities were struggling to do was establish a formal cliental relationship between themselves and unwed mothers. They wanted all women to accept their duty and breast-feed rather than abandon babies at birth. And they hoped to set the groundwork for a change in attitudes which would allow women to reclaim their infants openly.

In practice, however, the procedure they implemented to gain access to the woman was quite coercive. Beginning at the turn of the century, authorities at the foundling home in Rome began to send envoys to the nearby public hospital in San Giovanni whose maternity ward had been opened by Pius IX in 1865. The director of the foundling home made a formal agreement with the provincial board of hospitals to allow such representatives to be present in wards. Closed soon after 1865 because of a dearth in female patients, the ward had reopened in 1872 and functioned as a charity for women who were too poor to pay for home deliveries. Used as a teaching centre for third year medical students, the San Giovanni hospital was affiliated to the University of Rome's faculty of surgery. The agreement between the foundling home and the hospital authorities released the staff of San Giovanni of any legal responsibility for maternity declarations.<sup>29</sup>

The foundling home representatives attempted to convince each woman to nurse her infant as a condition of the child's admission to the *brefotrofio*. According to the statutes of the institution, authorities had the right to demand the woman pay a tax of 60 *lire* if she refused to breast-feed. This tax equalled what she would earn as a paid feeder for four months. The official also promised her room and board, confidentiality, and no formal obligation to reclaim. The actual documentation accompanying the negotiations involved only her contract as a paid *nutrice*. The removal of the mother and child to the foundling home brought immense benefits to the institution. The home's authorities would attempt to gain her consent to reclaim within the time allowed for birth registration. By law, registration had to take place within five days of the birth. To expedite matters, the home offered to pay for the registration, which cost 15 *lire*, and to send representatives in her place to the record office.<sup>30</sup>

Although the home's authorities preferred to get reclamation over with at the time of birth registration, they still had four months to persuade the woman to accept her responsibility. The internal organi-

sation of the home promoted their efforts. The woman was completely isolated from the outside world during her time as a *nutrice*. She was not allowed to receive visitors or to leave the grounds of the institution. Along with ascetic living conditions, the institutional regimen included a fixed breast-feeding schedule, sewing and cleaning, and religious instruction under the supervision of nuns. Feeders wore special uniforms with detachable fronts while breast-feeding and nursed as many babies as they could.<sup>31</sup>

By the turn of the century, 21 foundling homes had moved to make maternal confinements a part of their routine procedure. After they opened shelters, authorities in Milan, Como, Bologna, Ferrara, Ancona, and Orvieto reported that reclamations were beginning to rise as a result.<sup>32</sup> Other foundling home authorities established direct links with autonomous mothers' refuges which were starting to increase in number as a consequence of growing philanthropic interest in rescuing unwed mothers. And in Alessandria, Turin, Pavia, and Padua, authorities sent representatives to maternity hospitals in order to reach the women directly.<sup>33</sup>

Foundling home authorities were beginning to change the institutional contours of the *brefotroflo*. The growth in the number of public hospitals and maternity wards in Italy facilitated this process. Out of a total of 1,167 hospitals, 55 had a maternity ward by the turn of the century. These, institutions, however, were located primarily in northern regions; while Lombardy had the highest percentage, for example, Basilicata had no public hospital of any kind.<sup>34</sup> The gradual increase in hospital births also consolidated the efforts of authorities to reach out to the unwed mother. From 5,880 hospital births in 1886, the number rose to 16,608 by 1898 and continued to grow.<sup>35</sup>

Married and unmarried women, moreover, lived an entirely different experience of hospital births. Unwed women were segregated in special wards for *nubili*. Medical men chose to explain this symbolic gulf as a gesture of respect towards decent women.<sup>36</sup> These attitudes spilled over into the sort of medical treatment unwed mothers received.

#### ***Science and Beneficence***

During unification, obstetrics developed as a postgraduate specialisation within Italy's five major medical schools.<sup>37</sup> Because

obstetrics grew out of surgery, practitioners expressed a clear preference for instrumental and manual interventions in childbirth. A leading figure in the movement to professionalise the discipline, Scipione Giordano wrote a medical text in 1860 which defined vaginal "exploration" during birth as a recommended procedure to monitor the course of dilatation.<sup>38</sup> And in 1883, another prominent obstetrician who began his career as a military doctor during the wars of liberation, advised students to perform a full hysterectomy as a precautionary measure on patients who seemed prone to long and troublesome labours.<sup>39</sup>

A leading specialist in his field, Scipione Giordano became a professor of obstetrics and took over direction of the lying-in ward of the public maternity hospital in Turin. The ward provided shelter for women during their last two months of confinement. A special *reparto* of the hospital housed the unwed women who awaited birth. In 1862, Giordano added new beds to the ward, expanded the operating theatre, and made internships there mandatory for his students at the University. Giordano practised interventionist methods in the deliveries he performed at the ward. The use of forceps, the doctor's own preferred method to reduce labour time, and other intrusive measures, like the manipulation of the cervix to stimulate the onset of birth, became standard procedures.<sup>40</sup>

These practices resulted in a high rate of maternal mortality due to "accidents in birth", a phenomenon also evidenced in national statistics during this period.<sup>41</sup> And, in this era before antiseptic agents were used in medical interventions, Giordano did not realise that these techniques increased a woman's risk of bacterial infection. Quite soon after these institutional changes, the clinic also experienced a wave of puerperal fever. The first of its kind in the ward's 21 years of existence, this outbreak was no isolated incident; in the following decades, puerperal fever erupted sporadically and seldom failed to reach epidemic proportions.<sup>42</sup>

Medical intervention no doubt played a crucial role in this development. And, interestingly, Giordano recorded that the first outbreak was confined to the section for *nubili*. He also left a clue as to why this occurrence should happen. Though he assigned no particular importance to his observation, Giordano noted that refurbishments had made the married women's ward more clean, spacious,

and functional. But the rooms where the unmarried patients stayed, he recounted, were badly equipped and had no running water, ventilation, lighting or disposal facilities. In this wing, women did not receive clean linen regularly; nor did orderlies take any particular sanitary precautions to remove natal waste efficiently from crowded dormitories.<sup>43</sup> Because the mortality from puerperal fever was nearly absolute, Giordano was determined to diagnose the causes of this important disease. The spread, he observed, seemed almost entirely confined to his "unfortunate charity cases". By performing full autopsies on the victims, including craniectomies, he aimed to decipher the means of transmission.<sup>44</sup>

In the course of its emergence as a major medical and social problem engendering much debate, puerperal fever came to be identified as an affliction of unwed mothers. While French clinicians had already made some progress towards diagnosing the disease as infectious, Italian experts refused to accept this line of scientific reasoning.<sup>45</sup> Giordano, among others, prided himself on having made a major breakthrough in understanding the causes when he isolated unwed mothers as the source of the contagion. An outwardly healthy woman, he deduced, harboured some inherent psychological and physiological predisposition. The "humours", he affirmed, provided a clue as the autopsies had revealed that blood congealed around the left ventricle of the heart. This symptom owed its origin to some defect at birth which predisposed certain women to the disease. But the prime cause for the quick onset of the disease, the uncontrollable chills, and the raging fever which overcame victims was in woman's own excitable nature.<sup>46</sup>

The moral imbecility and emotional instability of unwed mothers, Giordano believed, predisposed them to puerperal fever. Because of their wretched condition, these women fell victim to bouts of uncontrollable sadness, guilt, and remorse which were the first symptoms of their pathological state and high susceptibility to the illness. He remarked in his clinical notes that he had never seen an unwed mother who had been happy before the physical signs appeared. These women on the whole were "disturbed, inquiet, anxious, imploring, and insecure." Although the doctor did his best to calm them with wine and laudanum, they often cried or showed fear without the least apparent provocation. The regimen and monotony of the lying-in ward contributed to the mayhem and hysteria which regularly overcame women

patients, he stated. And, the religious instruction given by nuns, the doctor remarked, did not lend them any solace. The nuns' haranguing, he believed, was an "instrument of terror", which forced women to undergo daily rituals of penitence.<sup>47</sup>

The tyranny exercised by Catholic dogma, Giordano recounted, explained the "maniacal" manifestations of the illness. In their "demoniacal deliriums", he stated, these women would utter rapid confessions and prayers in an uncontrolled frenzy. Other medical observers similarly described the sufferings of puerperal madness, and mistook these probably drug and alcohol heightened symptoms to mean that the woman was possessed of a chaotic and unruly character.<sup>48</sup> Giordano himself offered an interpretation never clear or consistent; he muddled environmental, congenital, social, and emotional causes but always came back to the moral disorder in woman's nature that seemed the root of it all. He could not explain why the incidence remained extremely low in southern Italy where women by and large still gave birth at home. But he argued that southern women were demonstrably more robust in character and constitution than their frail northern counterparts.<sup>49</sup>

No fewer than ten major theories about puerperal fever circulated throughout the medical community. Each had its own idiosyncrasy in a variety of attributions to female nervous psychosis and psychic languor, puerperal poison, and uterine morbidity, secretions, arrest, disintegration, pollution, and self-putrefaction.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, child-bearing was becoming a leading cause of accidental and sickness-related death amongst women of reproductive age. By 1918, maternal casualties reached levels almost equal to the deathrates amongst the male war-wounded.<sup>51</sup>

#### ***Parliament's Position on Unwed Motherhood***

In December 1907, the Italian senate met to discuss a reform bill which proposed that parliament enact legislation to abolish the nation's 462 remaining *ruote*. The discussion turned to the question of whether unwed mothers should be forcibly confined and held bound to breast-feed their infants. Prime Minister Giolitti admitted that some foundling homes abused their authority, violated rulings on women's right to privacy, tricked women into making declarations of maternity, instigated searches to uncover the identity of women, and coerced women into reclamations. Beneficence, he stated, had begun to treat

unwed mothers as fugitives and to punish them with a prison-like confinement. The institutional isolation of the maternity refuges imposed a strict regimen which seemed to him to be uncivilised and harsh.<sup>52</sup>

The three-day debate concluded in tacit approval of the various strategies used by foundling homes to prevent abandonment. The opinions expressed by legislators focused on how beneficial the new methods were for public providers who were concerned about combatting this social problem. Enforced access to mother's milk, one senator asserted, was the only way foundling homes were ever going to reduce rates of infant mortality which were between 90 and 95 percent. Confinements before and after birth, he believed, allowed authorities the time they needed to cultivate maternal instinct. Daily contact with the child stimulated a mother's protective and nurturant nature and resulted in reclamation.<sup>53</sup>

Another senator argued that foundling homes were at the forefront of a social struggle for the moral regeneration of the nation. The same law-maker ended his defense of the right of foundling homes to force women to accept motherhood with an anecdote. In 1898, he related, one of two foundling homes in Bologna had become frustrated enough with seasonal fluctuations in the wetnurse market that directors decided to initiate a policy of mandatory maternal confinements for a minimum of three months. An intrepid female filed a lawsuit against the home on the grounds of unlawful detention. The foundling home authorities settled out of court and paid the mother compensation. Fearful of more scandal, the home's officials decided to revert back to the old method of bottle-feeding infants waiting to be farmed out to the countryside. The 25 percent deathrate achieved during the brief interlude when mothers breast-fed skyrocketed to over 90 percent as a consequence of "artificial methods of feeding". When the press and town leaders picked up on the case, the senator remarked, the woman was suitably condemned for her selfishness. The favourable publicity permitted the governing body to approve of re-installment of the controversial method. Ending his account, the senator added that once women were again confined within the *brefotroffio* a bewildered mortician had gone to the home wondering what had become of the doctor who had been killing so many babies.<sup>54</sup>

Parliament did not approve of the proposed passage of national

legislation to force the closure of the turnstiles yet in use. Although they realised that rates of abandonment were much higher in areas where the turnstile still existed, law-makers deferred their decision on the future of *opere pie*. Parliamentarians could not act resolutely without committing central government to a long-term plan for a financial investment in the infrastructure of beneficence. They recognised the fact that the nation's *brefotrofi* were underfunded and rundown and that many provinces still lacked any facilities for foundlings. Only 2,240 of the nation's 8,269 communes made provision for foundlings in their budgets. They feared, however, that by deepening the debate on foundlings they would be forced to address the pressing need to put other forms of statutory provision on the books. Giolitti mentioned the failures of the law of 19 November 1889 on public security to help homeless minors. Designed to halt the spread of pauperism, the law held communes responsible for the obligatory recovery of adolescents in public alms houses. The enactment, Giolitti stated, was patently inhumane because it put young children in the same legal category as vagabonds. He pointed out what seemed to him to be the central dilemma of the state. Since the Treasury had failed to forward extra cash to municipalities to help them build more poor-houses, the act had only a very limited impact anyway. Parliament could go on debating for decades about *pubblica beneficenza*, Giolitti remarked, but without more funds, the state would never be able to protect the welfare of the nation's least fortunate citizens.<sup>55</sup>

On practical terms, parliamentarians could not object to the achievements which foundling home reform had already realised. They gave their endorsement to the measures implemented by foundling home authorities to seek out and detain unwed mothers. But when the discussion turned to whether law-makers should condone paternity searches too, they all seemed to agree that such a move was unwise and premature. The question of whether putative fathers should be held liable to claims for child support by unmarried mothers had been on the agenda since the beginning of the movement for foundling home reform. But parliamentarians chose not to open up this debate either on the grounds that innocent men would fall victim to false allegations of paternity.<sup>56</sup>

Parliament's endorsement of maternity searches edged the debate on beneficence away from a serious discussion of the structural defici-



encies of public provision. The problem of the number and quality of care institutions remained a secondary issue though chronic insufficiencies on both counts kept the whole beneficent apparatus wanting. National legislation to clarify the legal parameters of aid towards illegitimates did not seem forthcoming. And so the administration of programmes, like those for maternal subsidies, did not become standard and uniform procedure everywhere in the nation.

The liberal period saw the emergence of the unwed mother as an object for rehabilitation and control. Forced out from behind the protective shroud of the turnstile, the unwed mother was exposed to the rigours and risks accompanying redemptive medical and social strategies. Reformers preserved traditional attitudes about unwed mothers and treated them as a caste best secluded from respectable society. Foundling home authorities used women as a source of life for infants, while doctors treated them as a source of contagion. In the debate about puerperal fever, the disease became fixed in the medical mind as a symptom of the social pathology of unwed motherhood. Yet both reformers and doctors imposed a new concealment on women who were isolated in wards and shelters.

#### *The Legacy of Liberalism*

In September 1917, directors of the nation's foundling homes assembled in Rome for a conference jointly hosted by the Ministry of Health. Delegates voted to invoke government to pass far reaching legislation on the "protection of infancy and childhood". Authorities did not confine their demands to an appeal for state involvement in the process of foundling home reform. They put a whole range of issues on the agenda. They called for central government support for the creation of milk depots, maternal kitchens, and crèches. They wanted parliament to consider placing laws on affiliation, adoption, and paternity on the books. And they proposed that the legislature enact laws on all categories of "morally and materially abandoned adolescents", including "juvenile delinquents" and "mentally and physically deficient children".<sup>57</sup>

The war had broadened the reformist platform. Foundling home authorities were convinced that the whole machinery of beneficence had collapsed. Homes had been forced to take in more infants as abandonment rates escalated throughout the war. The director of the home in Reggio Emilia complained that he had to relax rulings on poverty and

domicile and extend the geographic radius of his administration from 15 to 45 municipalities. During the war, the *brefotrofio* had gone into debt as provincial and municipal government haggled over their respective shares in finance.<sup>58</sup> Other arguments revived old issues which dated back to the era of the reform of *opere pie*. Foundling home directors admitted that their institutions were still unsafe, unclean and inefficient.<sup>59</sup>

The war also put new burdens on beneficence and further strained its old institutional structure. Military authorities began to requisition hospitals beginning in late 1916. Needed for returning soldiers suffering psychological and physical disabilities, available beds in specialised institutions were found to be exceedingly scarce. Still more cracks appeared in the beneficent foundation. Many local government authorities had seen income reserves drained soon after the onset of hostilities. Provinces and municipalities found themselves entirely unable to cope with the pressures of increased demand for social assistance. In an effort to provide some form of aid for returning veterans, foundling homes and mental asylums were quickly converted into military hospitals. With residents hurriedly removed to institutions adapted to provide entirely different facilities, a complete breakdown of services seemed imminent. Injured soldiers were shuffled into orphanages and alms houses too.<sup>60</sup> This chaos paralysed the recovery effort and brought home to authorities just how weak the institutional structure of public beneficence was. Throughout the remainder of the war, the growing reform lobby managed to secure repeated claims of parliamentary commitment to change.<sup>61</sup> On the peacetime agenda stood their demand for a final solution to the question of the future of *beneficenza pubblica*.

## Endnotes

- 1 *Inchiesta sui brefotrofi*, pp. 13; 51.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 12-14.
- 3 *Ibid.*, table pp. 64-8.
- 4 *Statistica delle cause di morte nell'anno 1905*, appendix, pp. 1-3.
- 5 *Inchiesta sui brefotrofi*, p. 41.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 42; and see, ASCR, P. Blasi, *Relazione del Brefotrofio di Roma, 1897-1898* (Rome, 1898), pp. 1-12 on the problem of false documentation in Rome.
- 7 *Inchiesta sui brefotrofi*, p. 13.
- 8 See ISTAT, *Statistica delle cause delle morti per l'anno 1918* (Rome, 1924), p. xxxi, for a table on neonatal mortality by civil status for the years 1887 to 1918.
- 9 See G. Mortara, "Nuovi dati sulla natalità in Italia", *Giornale degli Economisti*, XVII (August, 1934), pp. 552-63.
- 10 *Statistica delle cause di morte nell'anno 1905*, appendix, pp. 4-5.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 14 *Inchiesta sui brefotrofi*, p. 62.
- 15 See the *Statuto-Regolamento del Brefotrofio di S. Spirito del 1924* (Rome, 1924), which gives a history of these administrative changes, found in IPALI.
- 16 C. Pinzi, *La questione degli esposti: Discorso letto nella inaugurazione del nuovo brefotrofio di Viterbo* (Viterbo, 1889), pp. 28-2.
- 17 C. Pinzi, *L'Ospizio di Viterbo dalla sua fondazione sino all'anno 1890* (Viterbo, 1891), pp. 186-8; 191.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 82; 97-9.
- 19 *Inchiesta sui brefotrofi*, pp. 10; and see, A. Del Piano, "L'Opera di aiuto materno a Rimini," *MI*, II (July, 1927), pp. 39-47, on similar reform efforts in Rimini after 1910.
- 20 *Inchiesta sui brefotrofi*, p. 13.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

- 22 *Cenni statistici sul Pio Istituto di S. Spirito in Sassia in Roma* (Rome, 1880), p.79; and R. Griffini, *Intorno all'ospizio provinciale degli esposti e delle partorienti in Milano nell'anno 1876* (Milan, 1877), p. 9.
- 23 Anon., *Relazione generale dell'ospizio provinciale di Milano per l'anno 1887* (Milan, 1889), p. 12.
- 24 ASCR, Anon., *Brefotrofio di Santo Spirito* (Rome, 1880), p. 4; ASCR, P. Blasi, *Relazione del Brefotrofio* (Rome, 1898), p. 20.
- 25 ASCR, O. Parisotti, *Brefotrofio di Roma: La sezione legittimi* (Rome, 1915), p. 3.
- 26 ASCR, O. Parisotti, *Brefotrofio di Roma: Relazione generale, 1917-1918* (Rome, 1918), pp. 6-9; Griffini, *Relazione generale dell'ospizio provinciale di Milano per l'anno 1887* (Milan, 1889), p. 12.
- 27 *Inchiesta sui brefotrofi*, p. 10; 89.
- 28 A. Montani, *Tre anni di presidenza al Brefotrofio di Roma, 1923-1926* (Rome, 1927), pp. 16-7.
- 29 M. Mauri, *Relazione del Brefotrofio di Roma, 1904-1905* (Rome, 1906), pp.8-9. He does note, however, that: "the custody of infants is still predominantly done externally...In many small villages surrounding Rome, wetnursing is even more speculative and thriving than ever. Foundlings are considered by peasants to be merchandise. The traffic in human contraband especially has increased, and this growing industry provides many thousands of *lire* annually to otherwise depressed areas. For the most part, the infant represents to a poor peasant family a livelihood for as long as the contract lasts, and a means to pay back debts or rents in times of trouble. One has only to note that the most requests we receive for contracts come from the most miserable and destitute areas to appreciate the economic significance of wetnursing." On the Hospital of San Giovanni, O. Viana and F. Vozza, *L'Ostetricia e la ginecologia in Italia* (Milan, 1933), pp. 778; 783; 793.
- 30 A. Montani, *Tre anni di presidenza al Brefotrofio di Roma*, pp. 18-9.
- 31 ASCR, Opera Pia 'Asilo Materno' di Roma, *Resoconto statistico finanziario dal 15 settembre 1903 al 31 dicembre 1922* (Rome, 1923), pp. 9-10 on internal organisation.
- 32 *Inchiesta sui brefotrofi*, pp. 42.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 34 Min. AIC, *Risultati dell'inchiesta sulle condizioni igieniche e sanitari nei comuni del regno*, Relazione generale, (Rome, 1886), p. ccxlili.

- 35 ISTAT, *Statistica degli ospedali e degli altri istituti pubblici e privati di assistenza sanitaria* (Rome, 1932), pp. 5; 8.
- 36 See, T. M. Caffarotto, *L'ostetricia, la ginecologia, e la chirurgia in Piemonte dalle origini ai giorni nostri* (Saluzzo, 1973), p. 358.
- 37 Viana and Voza, *L'Ostetricia e la ginecologia in Italia*, pp. 21-37; 1075-1104, on the development of the medical curriculum and the growth of regional and national obstetric societies.
- 38 See E. Cova, *Evoluzione della ostetricia negli ultimi quarant'anni* (Siena, 1924), pp. 15-24, on the prewar progress of the profession in creating permanent teaching posts in hospitals. Also on the drive to expand clinical practice beyond the orbit of large metropolitan centres, V. Busacchi and E. Greco, "Clinici medici, chirurghi, ed ostetrici nella età del Risorgimento," *Pagine di storia della medicina*, V (May/June, 1961), pp. 3-15.
- 39 F. La Torre, *L'utero attraverso i secoli: storia, iconografia, struttura, fisiologia* (Città di Castello, 1917), pp. 607; 635-41; and his *Intorno all'indicazione dell'isterectomia nelle infezioni puerperali e alla cura di esse* (Rome, 1901); and see his *Curriculum vitae* (Rome, 1903), which documents his discovery of obstetrics, his visits to Jean-Michel Charcot's hysteria clinic in Paris, and other adventures.
- 40 S. Giordano, *Della febbre puerperale osservata nella clinica ostetrica: dell'eclampsia e dell'edema acuto* (Turin, 1859), p. 20; and see his book of poems, *Rime di più che mezzo secolo* (Turin, 1893), especially pp. 55-64 for a poem about a woman in a fatal postpartum travail. And on his career, see G. Faldella, *Un mistero ed uno scettico (Tancredi Canonico e Scipione Giordano: Vite parallele)* (Rome, 1928), p. 144.
- 41 Giordano, *Della febbre puerperale osservato nella clinica*, p. 77.
- 42 See P. Frascani, *Ospedale e società in età liberale* (Bologna, 1986), pp. 53; 77. And see, E. Shorter, *A History of Women's Bodies* (New York, 1982), pp. 103-38, on postpartum infection rates elsewhere in Europe.
- 43 S. Giordano, "Statistica della sezione seconda dell'Ospizio di Maternità di Torino, 1851-1857," *Giornale delle Scienze Mediche della Reale Accademia Medico-Chirurgica di Torino*, XXIX (June, 1857), pp. 193-210.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 193-210.
- 45 A. Corradi, *Dell'ostetricia in Italia della metà dello scorso secolo fino al presente*, II (Bologna, 1875), p. 2332; and volume III, (Bologna, 1877), pp. 1865-71, on the work of Stéphane Tarnier on puerperal fever. And see M. G. Nardi, *Il pensiero ostetrico-ginecologo nei secoli* (Milan, 1944), p. 364 on therapeutic treatments.

- 46 *Della febbre puerperale*, p. 81. Giordano stated: "I am convinced of the autonomy of this pathology, which, as far as I am concerned, is due not to external infection but rather to the alteration of the humours and solids during birth, and from the sedentary life, the sad atmosphere of the shelter, and the hardship of these poor creatures who are subjected to institutional regimen....Certainly, I find the determining pathogenic factor in their infancy when the primary blood pollution must have occurred."
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 48 See D. Tibone, "Rendiconto statistico della febbre puerperale osservata nella clinica ostetrica," *Giornale della R. Accademia Medico-Chirurgica di Torino* (Turin, 1859), pp.108-155. To support his view that the primary cause of epidemic lay in the psychology of unwed motherhood, Tibone noted that the general hygiene of his hospice was quite good. Located on the fourth floor of a large *palazzo*, the clinic enforced confinement for women for up to three months before birth. The roughly fifty women residents lived in two dormitories where their only exercise was "forced domestic labour to combat their natural inclination towards laziness and inertia (p.110)." The largest complaint he received from the women who awaited birth was painful constipation, which he attributed not to these living conditions but to "inherent languid digestion and abdominal stasis (p.111)." These circumstances heightened the moral enervation and despair felt by these women, further contributing to their final downfall in a fevered dementia. In the case histories he proffered as proof of psychic disturbance, he commented on the characteristic low intelligence that might have played some part in the morbid decline of unwed mothers.
- 49 *Della febbre puerperale*, p. 81, where he referred to it as the "northern disease". See, the statistical pages in *Annali Universali di Medicina e Chirurgia*, CCLXXIX (May, 1887), pp. 474-7, which gives birth-related mortality for hospital patients at 16.6 per 100 women and deaths for home deliveries at just 1.57 percent. And, infant mortality due to birth damage and asphyxia showed an appreciably higher incidence in hospital deliveries. Largely confined to northern regions, the rate of stillbirth due to such causes had climbed to almost three times the national average in the early 1880s. And the statistical page in another issue of the same journal reported on a similar government investigation; see CCVXXXI (June, 1887), pp.284-319; 344-6.
- 50 See, A. Corradi, *Dell'ostetricia in Italia*, III, pp. 2025-82; and, Rusconi (no first name), "Ginecologia ed ostetricia", *Annuario delle Scienze Mediche*, XIX (Milan, 1889), pp. 443-81. Neither was another practitioner convinced by the infection theory: see, G. Chiarleoni, "Zaffo endouterino con garza iodoformica nella endometrite puerperali," *Annali Universali di Medicina e Chirurgia*, CCLXXXIII (Milan, 1888), pp.127-38.
- 51 See, Min. AIC, *Statistica delle cause di morte nell'anno 1909* (Rome, 1912), p.48, gave maternal mortality due to puerperal fever as the single largest cause of death for 20-40 year-olds,

- accounting for 16.8% of all deaths for women of that age. *Statistica delle cause di morte nell'anno 1914* (Rome, 1917), p. 43, credited childbirth with being the single most significant cause of death amongst women aged 20-39; considering all deaths related to accident, fever, and complication, maternal mortality arrived at 71 out of 1,000 deaths in that age bracket. And, ISTAT, *Statistica delle cause per l'anno 1918* (Rome, 1924), p. 40, made the comparison with war victims. Maternal mortality that year struck 15 out of 1,000 childbearing women, while 17 out of 1,000 war-wounded died from their injuries.
- 52 *ApS*, XXII Legis., I Sess. 1904-1907, Discussioni, Tornata of 9 December 1907 on Giolitti's bill, "sull'assistenza agli esposti ed all'infanzia abbandonata".
- 53 *Ibid.*
- 54 *Ibid.*
- 55 See also, *ApS*, XXI Legis., 1904-1907, Documenti-Disegni, "Disegno di legge di Giovanni Giolitti," Tornata of 4 May 1907. Giolitti's bill fell, and was re-submitted unsuccessfully in 1909, 1911, and again in 1917. Not until 1927 did the Italian parliament put the first comprehensive law for statutory provision towards illegitimates and their mothers on the books.
- 56 F. Romita, *Evoluzione storica dell'assistenza all'infanzia abbandonata* (Rome, 1965), pp. 32-5.
- 57 ACS, Min. Interno, DGAC, opere pie, 1916-1918, b. 19, f. 25283, sf. 13, minorenni: assistenza e tutela, organizzazione degli asili per l'infanzia abbandonata, gives the deliberations of foundling homes in the form of a memorandum for the Council of Ministers; and see the proposal by Luigi Antoldi for a law protecting "*infanzia moralmente e materialmente abbandonata e travolta*", 5 March 1914; and the manuscript on *abbandonati, ciechi, and sordomuti poveri*.
- 58 *Ibid.*, f. 25272.12c, relazioni sul servizio della beneficenza, prefect reports for the whole period, Reggio Emilia; and ACS, Min. Interno, DGSP, AG, anni 1910-1920, b. 599, f. 20900, sf. 7, congresso per l'assistenza della infanzia abbandonata, 1917, contains the resolutions of foundling homes, approved by the health ministry.
- 59 ACS, Min. Interno, DGSP, AG, anni 1910-1920, b. 599, f. 20900, sf. 38, relazione della commissione provinciale di beneficenza di Milano, 1915-1917, inchiesta sui servizi nella provincia.
- 60 ACS, Min. Interno, DGAC, opere pie, anni 1916-1918, b. 13, f. 25283.9, istituti e posti di ricovero nelle provincie, prefect reports by year.
- 61 ACS, Min. Interno, DGAC, opere pie, 1916-1918, b. 19, appunto per il Gabinetto di S. E. il Sottosegretario di Stato, 4 March 1914; and interrogazioni parlamentari, individual petitions to ministers and parliamentarians.

### The Illegitimacy Campaign under Fascism: 1923-1938

This chapter seeks to explore the nature of fascist illegitimacy policy in an attempt to draw out continuities and changes in state administration from the liberal period. Fascist policy differed little from liberal policy in so far as maternal reclamation remained the primary goal of rescue efforts. But the regime did tie the question of illegitimacy to the demographic campaign. New concerns dominated public debate about methods to combat this social problem. Other significant departures occurred, the most important of which resulted from centralised control of social programmes under ONMI.

Discussion of these changes attempts to highlight the main characteristics of welfare organisation under fascism. On 8 May 1926, ONMI issued a policy statement outlining plans to devote a disproportionately large share of its budget to a trial campaign. The 'battle' against illegitimacy which ensued was the regime's first serious challenge in the area of social reform. There was much that was progressive in new fascist laws and practice. The immediate abolition of the turnstile and the gradual dissolution of the foundling home stood out as two especially ambitious aims. But easy policy implementation continued to elude public bureaucracy even under a centralising dictatorship. By all accounts, the campaign came to a less than spectacular close in 1932. The experiment to promote 'modern' forms of welfare was a brief interlude marked by promise but marred in practice. The subsequent period saw a dismantling of services and a deterioration in care as public institutions under ONMI reverted to past procedure.

#### *The Aims of the 1923 and 1927 Legislation*

A decree law issued on 16 December 1923 abolished the archaic *ruota*.<sup>1</sup> As momentous as this legislation seemed to be, the law merely formalised the demise of the wheel in places where closures had long since taken place. And it had little effect in those areas where open turnstiles still existed. ONMI investigations found many wheels functioning well into the next decade, an important factor in assessing the impact of fascist policy. Weak public incursions on the charitable establishment proved no match for the force of resistance mounted in some southern and central regions.<sup>2</sup> Survival of the system of anonymous abandonment showed up the fragility of fascist welfare in



those strongholds where the Church sustained the institutional traditions of charity.

On 21 June 1926, ONMI's central council approved nominations for a commission to review all existing guidelines on aid to illegitimates. The members of the commission included directors of those major foundlings homes in Rome, Turin, and Milan, as well as ONMI officials. They based their recommendations on foundling home inspections begun in December 1925 and finished in the first six months of ONMI's existence.<sup>3</sup> The speed with which ONMI leaders acted reflected just how much a priority this single issue was for the organisation.

The first government inquiry since the 1900 inquest, the 1926 investigations were not published or publicised in the press. The results were kept secret because most of the nation's 121 foundling homes were exposed as unsafe, unclean, and inefficient institutions.<sup>4</sup> ONMI officials expressed surprise about how little *brefotrofi* had changed since the 1900 report. Only a few of the richer establishments had implemented any of the improvements made mandatory by the 1923 legislation. Most lacked any medical staff or facilities for sick babies. Still under the direction of charitable sisterhoods, many had failed to hire any trained administrative personnel. Evidence of extremely high levels of mortality amongst internally-maintained infants influenced the decision to hush the matter. Findings revealed that the majority of Italian homes had deathrates of 50 percent and upwards. Some especially poor institutions admitted to 100 percent mortality for internal babies. Because many homes obstructed efforts to search premises and sequester records, ONMI investigators concluded their directors had much to hide. They suspected farmed-out infants also had low chances of survival since so few homes organised any system of wetnurse medical certification or health visits.<sup>5</sup>

The 1926 inquiry recommended rapid centralisation of services under ONMI. Commissioners voiced their criticism of the "absolute inability of provincial governments to handle the responsibility of assistance towards foundlings". The consequences of provincial maladministration, they believed, were "a wasteful and inefficient squandering of revenue without any benefit to the tens of thousands of infants who died each year at great public expense". Members of the commission voted to express their full endorsement of the proposal to give control of budgeting and targeting of programmes to the ONMI central

directorate.<sup>6</sup>

Almost immediately after completion of their report, the ONMI commission began to draft a bill which passed with few amendments. With the promulgation of the law of 8 May 1927, the regime completed the long-standing agenda for statutory social assistance towards illegitimates. The act finally established the uniform and national system of provision which the liberal parliament had promised for decades. The legislation was far reaching and progressive in design.

The new system outlined in the 1927 legislation differed from the framework established under the successive local government acts during the liberal period. Provincial governments still administered aid for *abbandonati* and *esposti*, but this mandatory service now came under ONMI direction. While still allowing provincial administrations some control over the types of programmes appropriate to local needs, the enactment set a clear precedent for national uniformity of provision. Article 1, for example, showed a preference for nursing subsidies to be changed from mere discretionary expenditures to fixed and large portions of provincial budgets. Although advocating some measure for nationwide minimum pay scales, the article acknowledged the diversity of resources in different regions and the difficulty of setting unrealistically high standards for poor provinces.<sup>7</sup>

The law considerably expanded the eligibility and entitlements of unwed mothers. ONMI's own regulation of 25 December 1925 had outlined statutory requirements for assistance to all unmarried women without regard to domicile, age, character, number of preceding pregnancies, and the conditions of previous children.<sup>8</sup> The 1927 legislation maintained this broad definition of need and further specified that foundling homes and public hospitals had no right to refuse access to women on the grounds of insufficient proof of poverty or settlement. Especially significant, article 18 stated that it was now illegal for a public or private institution to require women to register as paupers in their commune of birth before applying for aid in another district. The abolition of restrictive qualifications was a major improvement over existing procedure. These guidelines effectively liberated women from the bureaucratic regime of disclosure and documentation imposed under liberalism. But enforcing implementation of such radical measures would prove no easy task.<sup>9</sup>

Further evidence of the progressive spirit of this legislation,

clauses made mandatory provision for early recovery of pregnant women. Article 4 specified that in provinces with sufficient resources assistance should begin at the earliest possible moment in the pregnancy, preferably sometime between the third and sixth month. Besides making provision for mothers' kitchens as part of a prospective nationwide free meal plan, the law specified that provinces should aim to create shelters for homeless women. Different in conception from those wards opened during the maternal hospice movement, these *albergi* were not meant to be medical facilities for enforced confinement but rather purely residential establishments. Maternal reclamation though remained the main objective of social welfare. In addition to the nursing subsidies already dispensed in some provinces, the benefit scheme outlined in the 1927 law included a reclamation premium. This award was designed as a new positive incentive to attract more women to reclaim. The aim behind all these measures was to provide unmarried women with an adequate system of continuous prenatal and postnatal care integrating forms of direct economic aid with auxiliary services.<sup>10</sup>

With regard to the differing legal categories of illegitimates, the 1927 enactment preserved in principle the existing framework of services for *abbandonati* and *esposti*. The foundling home remained intact though the makers of the 1927 law hoped to render the institution obsolete by offering unwed mothers viable alternatives to abandonment. The law marked a significant turning point in this respect by making provision for reclaimed infants statutory. In contrast to the organisation of assistance towards foundlings by provincial governments, ONMI would administer services for reclaimed infants. The provincial federations of ONMI were required to set the amounts of subsidies due nursing mothers and supervise the functioning of the whole programme. This measure for direct control by ONMI underlined the priority of reclamation in the organisation's policy.<sup>11</sup>

The principal weakness of the 1927 law pertained to guidelines covering finance procedure. The provinces and municipalities together would still share the costs of foundling provision according to the first article. This measure preserved the existing financial structure, which had long proven to be thoroughly unwieldy to manage. As in the past, provincial governments had to anticipate the full expense in advance and then negotiate the terms of reimbursement with

municipalities. The chief drawback of this system of administration had been that provinces were so burdened that they made stingy allowances for this service in their budgets. Why lawmakers should now expect local governments to improve on past performance by setting aside even larger sums than before seemed rather mysterious.<sup>12</sup>

Another shortcoming of budgeting arrangements, rulings on the contributions made by ONMI to the cost of public provision complicated matters. Sums earmarked for the reclamation programmes, as well as those covering foundling care, were destined for provincial governments. The central directorate of ONMI determined the amount of each grant on the basis of *per capita* expenditure within each provincial administration. Once again, however, provincial governments had to anticipate these monies when setting expenditure and then await reimbursement after spending. Twice a year in December and July, ONMI would issue back payments but only after review of provincial accounts. If ONMI officials found some provinces had over spent or misappropriated their budgets, the law allowed them to withhold repayment altogether. While giving no revenue incentive to those local authorities who took a miserly approach, these measures gave no guarantee to more extravagant governments that ONMI would help them in the end to discharge heavy debts.<sup>13</sup>

Notwithstanding these obvious weaknesses, the 1927 legislation changed the terms of illegitimacy policy to the betterment of unmarried mothers. The strong position on maternity searches was especially impressive. Article 9 did grant foundling homes and wetnurse agencies the right to conduct "reserved investigations to seek out the mother of an abandoned baby". Doctors and midwives in attendance at birth were also held legally responsible to co-operate with competent authorities by divulging the names and whereabouts of mothers. The article made mention of the illegality of a false registration of civil status and the harsh penalties for such crimes in the civil code. After extracting a declaration of maternity, foundling homes were now legally empowered to "gently induce women to reclaim their infants".<sup>14</sup> In contrast to the tacit endorsement offered by the liberal parliament, these provisions gave formal sanction to the practice of searches. However, the law set very clear limits to the exercise of these powers by receiving institutions.

The law deprived foundling homes of the right to break the civil

code's confidentiality clause, article 376. Strict observance of "secrecy" and "respect for women's wishes" was demanded of public and private authorities. And the enactment defended the right of women to withhold consent and refuse to make a formal declaration of motherhood.<sup>15</sup> In theory at least, this provision afforded women a large measure of protection from undue harassment. But it was not enough for the fascist government to put admirable statutes on the books without ensuring adequate provision for enforcement. The 1927 ruling on women's right to privacy did not bring an end to the old enmity foundling homes felt for outside interference in maternity searches. Nor did ONMI ever succeed in breaking the fierce independence of these institutions. Central directives and threat of closure proved lamentably lame as foundling homes carried on much as before.

ONMI issued the first of many angry circulars to foundling home directors in May 1930. The organisation's investigations had revealed widespread violations of the law. Typical infractions included the continued preference shown by foundling homes for written contracts which bound the mother to nurse for a specified period. Other contraventions comprised revelations about frequent abuses of the power of maternity searches resulting in the unwarranted exposure of the identity of mothers. Many foundling homes did not accept the baby if not presented personally by the mother. Others refused entry even when a birth certificate showed the child to be legally registered as an *ignoto*. But the most common offense involved the charge that foundling homes treated mothers in a "thoroughly brusque and uncivil manner in their official interrogations". In their frantic attempt to obtain formal reclamation, they hassled women "while the law requires the utmost delicacy and patience in the work of subtle persuasion". All these and other illegalities, the report stated, had become so commonplace that many foundling homes actually made provision for them in their governing statutes.<sup>16</sup>

These irregularities demonstrated the difficulty ONMI had in policy implementation when confronted with such obstruction. The position of the organisation's leaders was that maternity searches "seriously compromised the development of the regime's demographic campaign." Fear of increasing already rising rates of abortion, abandonment, and infanticide proved sufficient cause to issue caution. Involuntary

entrapment of women into single parenthood, they believed, did little to excite popular support for the government. Fascism, they stated, recognised that the "collaboration of unwed mothers" with the campaign to combat abandonment was "absolutely indispensable".<sup>17</sup>

***The Medical Profession and Motherhood***

Despite government resolve that single parenthood should be a free choice, the problem remained of how best to protect infant life. Public providers faced the formidable prospect of caring for a huge population of child dependents from earliest infancy through adolescence. In a nation depleted of resources by war and reconstruction, the costs of social dependency seemed to some a drain the country could ill afford. Demographic evidence appeared to confirm the worst of suspicions. Contemporary observers believed social welfare would have to confront a progressive growth in the sheer volume of need. ONMI authorities noted with some alarm that 50,834 illegitimates were born in 1922, 49,272 in 1923, and 53,834 in 1924. These annual totals were higher by over 20,000 than the number of illegitimates born in 1900. In the three years between 1922 and 1924, just under 40,000 infants were abandoned to foundling homes. Only about 1 in every 6 illegitimates born between 1922 and 1924 was later reclaimed by at least one parent and this average was lower than reclamation rates had been in the prewar period.<sup>18</sup>

An especially worrying trend for many commentators, evidence compiled by public health authorities seemed to indicate a progressive decline in breast-feeding as a customary practice.<sup>19</sup> Postwar data collected at one paediatric clinic showed that a growing generational divide in women's attitudes towards nursing was occurring. Published results of a study noted that older women giving birth to second or third children during and after the war breast-fed as a matter of course while younger women giving birth for the first time during the same period preferred both the commercial and home-made alternatives.<sup>20</sup> Other studies pointed to class and geographic variations in feeding practice. One such investigation charted the rapid diffusion of "modern" methods in northern regions, but concluded that in the South "artificial" feeding remained scarce while "mixed" methods were only slowly gaining ground.<sup>21</sup> And a government inquiry completed in 1933 concluded optimistically that mothers from the urban and rural working classes in Latium still

breast-fed their infants "as a rule" though they probably weaned infants earlier now than their mothers had done in the prewar period.<sup>22</sup>

These findings showed less than a complete profile of feeding practice for the nation as a whole. But the medical community still found sufficient cause for complaint. Mortality for illegitimate and legitimate infants continued to differ so dramatically and "digestive disorders" ranked high on the list of major causes of death.<sup>23</sup> Foundling hospitals were a major contributor to this since many had relied almost exclusively on bottle-feeding during the war and had yet to improve hygienic standards by 1927.<sup>24</sup> The collapse of the wetnurse market after mobilisation when rural women turned to farm and field work instead became chronic and acute in the postwar period. Although wetnursing remained an important source of income in areas of low female employment and migration, some provinces in even northern and central regions where the system prevailed reported sharp declines in the practice.<sup>25</sup>

These trends left their mark on social policy. Beginning in 1926, ONMI helped launch a wide publicity drive aimed at encouraging Italian women to "offer their breasts to the *patria*". Spokesmen used the full panoply of scientific racism to give a new eugenic dimension to postwar debate. The official propaganda machine enlisted medical arguments about the natural goodness of mothers' milk in an onslaught of public applause for breast-feeding as a patriotic duty. This "blood and milk" campaign focused on the estimable honour given women to nourish the race. The fascist government even went so far as to criminalise the importation and sale of baby-bottles in Italy. The new legislation protecting the "hygiene of infancy" came into effect on 29 December 1927.<sup>26</sup>

But this initiative failed to satisfy many physicians and public providers who wanted government to take a more hard-line approach. The 9th Congress of Italian Paediatricians held in Trieste in 1920 had voted to render breast-feeding an absolute condition of assistance for unwed mothers. Again in September 1929, delegates at the Turin paediatric convention voted to make an "infant's right to mother's milk" a statutory provision in a prospective fascist children's charter. The 1928 National Congress of Nephrology in Ancona declared the bond between mother and child "sacred and indissoluble"

and breast-feeding "the supreme duty of all women". At the organisation's Bolzano Congress in 1930, nepiologists fully endorsed maternity searches, obligatory confinement, and forced feeding. The Italian Gynaecological and Obstetric Society as view women's primary role as the maternal one. In September 1929 representatives gathered in Rome and voted to lobby government for a legislative enactment compelling all Italian mothers to breast-feed their infants. Though doctors depicted breast-feeding as a "natural function of womanhood", they still wanted to supervise women in the act. Some paediatricians pressured government to establish "centres for the collection of human milk". Because they believed many women nursed their babies rather badly, and others failed to observe even elementary personal hygiene, they proposed that medical professionals should teach women to nurse "more rationally and scientifically".<sup>27</sup>

Some members of the medical profession believed that a "biological crisis" confronted the Italian race as women in increasing numbers "ignored the fundamental law of human evolution" by "refusing to nourish their young".<sup>28</sup> The fascist government did not respond to the continuing pressure by organised medicine for admittedly unenforceable and possibly unpopular initiatives. This did not stymie the scientific community. The fascist period saw the impact of ideas for a truly social eugenics grow stronger and more widespread. The chronic malnourishment of women who then gave birth to underweight infants gained some medical recognition. Failure on the mothers' part to yield sufficient milk had long been seen as one cause of infant mortality, but now doctors began to perceive the problem as largely preventable. Members of the gynaecological and obstetrical community wished for better "prenatal prophylaxis" to prepare the mother to fulfill her mission by monitoring pregnancy.<sup>29</sup>

Recognition of the need to have well-nourished mothers reflected underlying concerns for racial hygiene. Unwed mothers, one commentator believed, produced milk of inferior quality to that of married women, so many illegitimate infants failed to thrive. Others transmitted through their defective milk the germs causing disease and death in later life. Programmes to improve the lot of unwed mothers, he continued, should become part of the wider agenda for racial improvement under fascism. More money spent on health projects to feed and shelter the lone woman, he stressed, must be generally



accepted as a worthwhile investment for the survival of the nation. Fascism, he hoped, would transform the "sickly organism of the unwed mother" into a "perfect nursing system".<sup>30</sup>

As the eugenic platform broadened in scope, spokesmen uncovered new aspects of the problem of illegitimacy. This found expression in the rise of social medicine specialising in infant and child development. In the postwar period, nepiology and puericulture both became established fields of medicine, while paediatrics gained some professional standing as a discipline. Nepiology did not limit study to the fetus alone, but rather encouraged research into the wider questions of the relative effects of heredity and environment on individual constitution. Practitioners espoused differing views about the biological merits to the race of mother-based health care, but all adhered to some belief in a degenerative pedigree somehow passed through the placenta.<sup>31</sup>

Puericulturists saw their science as the study of infant nutrition with the aim of the prevention of morbidity and mortality due to mistakes in feeding.<sup>32</sup> In December 1929, the national assembly of the Italian Obstetric and Gynaecological Society voted in favour of promoting the entry of clinical puericulture into the operating theatre. They asked public hospital authorities to subsidise the employment of trained puericulturists. The plan involved neonatal detection of hereditary imperfections and close monitoring of early growth. Society members endorsed these moves because they believed that by allowing experts to examine infants, compile anthropometric data, and draw up charts of daily nutritional needs, they could save the lives of infants.<sup>33</sup>

Out of this interest in infancy grew the belief that child development could be controlled. Some nutritionists within the eugenic movement envisaged a future biotechnology which would be able to manipulate infant growth in a desired way.<sup>34</sup> A new wave of eugenic works appeared in the postwar period addressing the misery and deprivation inflicted upon illegitimates by an uncaring and inhumane society. These referred variously to unwanted infants as "social refuse" or "social outcasts" but all stressed the damage done to them by abandonment. For the first time in the long foundling home debate, attention focused on the harmful effects of institutionalised care on child psychology.

Not just the physical costs but also the emotional legacy of abandonment gained prominence in scientific discussions. All experts now agreed that illegitimate infants suffered impaired psychological development because of impersonal rearing and maternal rejection. Beginning first in 1920, these matters rose to the top of the list of complaints by medical specialists concerned with welfare reform.<sup>25</sup> This focus on the complexity of child development turned into a concerted attack on the foundling home as an "unsupportive" and "unfamilial" institution. The foundling home, these arguments stressed, had not yet shed its harsh institutional image as a cross between a hospital and convent despite efforts to incorporate residential facilities for nursing mothers. Nor could the archaic and outmoded institution ever respond to the newly recognised emotional and psychic needs of children.<sup>26</sup>

During the liberal period, many commentators referred to illegitimates as the "fruit of sin" and "un-named souls". These children were unknown persons who existed outside civil society and the Christian community for lack of parentage and family. But during the fascist period, the focus shifted to the emotional welfare of illegitimates. Abandoned infants now came to be seen as individuals formed by heredity and environment. On the one hand, this development lay the preparatory ideological groundwork for a more humane approach to public childrearing than had prevailed under liberalism. Expectations about the responsibility of society towards these dependents rose considerably during this period. But on the other hand, new scientific ideas reinforced old prejudice about the primary role played by mothers in the biological and emotional evolution of children. And, most significantly, wide recognition of the forces which shape personality and behaviour exposed these 'problem-children' to new forms of social diagnosis and control.

#### ***Illegitimacy and the Scare of Juvenile Delinquency***

The question of whether dependent infants and children fared better under fascism than before can not be answered without reference to significant but hitherto neglected aspects of the regime's social policy. One of these is the "battle against juvenile delinquency" which was intimately connected to the illegitimacy campaign. One commentator applauded the government for its efforts to contain "social deviance" and lamented the "horrifying contribution

illegitimates make towards raising levels of infant mortality, tuberculosis, alcoholism, and, above all, precocious delinquency". He continued:

"...shunned to the margins of middle-class society, humiliated and scorned, illegitimates are exposed to awful privations which destroy physical health and morality....they become for society a burden and even a threat".

Touching the authoritarian sensibilities of the regime, the problem, he believed, had to be solved because "fascism can not tolerate persons who have no official status and live outside the sphere of influence of family and state".<sup>37</sup>

Another reformer offered a rehabilitative scheme for delinquents tied to the regime's ruralisation programme. To cure children of bad habits learned in wayward adolescence, he believed, alternative family forms must be developed to take the place of the traditional reformatory. Not just criminous children, but also victims of abuse and neglect removed from their own families could benefit from the "regenerative effects of country life". Fascism must encourage the growth of farming communities and small family homesteads where "degenerate children can learn through hard labour the values of honesty and work".<sup>38</sup>

According to one specialist, the juvenile offender now came to be considered under fascism an "impaired and immature individual rather than a born and uneducable criminal". As part of a plan of social prevention and defense, she maintained, corrective measures could do considerably more to "re-educate minors" than punitive ones had done in the past. Rather than impose imprisonment in adult penitentiaries, where children learned to become dangerous and incorrigible criminals, the regime should create more reformatories for the care of young derelicts to encourage their "social adaptation". The problem was of grave national concern, she believed, given the postwar surfeit of abandoned infants who were "destined to fill the ranks of reckless and slothful youths dedicated to wasteful lives as vagabonds, prostitutes, beggars, and thieves".<sup>39</sup>

This argument advocating correction rather than punishment reflected the growing conviction that penal and social policy must be radically changed in order to deter the spread of juvenile delinquency. The belief that minors should be treated less harshly than adults under criminal law was based on recognition of social

conditioning as a major cause of crime. Most delinquents were otherwise "normal" children who because of mental immaturity had been corrupted by their surroundings, and particularly by those in which immorality, drunkenness, theft, and violence were rife. Detrimental environments caused malformation of character and faculties, and severely limited the capacity of these children to judge right from wrong.<sup>40</sup>

Descriptions of harmful influences unfailingly focused on how badly the lower orders raised their children. Poor moral standards rather than social and economic deprivation came to be identified as a major inducement for children to go astray. As one commentator observed, juvenile delinquency was a "social scourge endemic to inferior elements in the labouring class and certain sectors of the lower middle class but unknown in good families".<sup>41</sup> Others regarded the problem as a "racial question" and attached greater importance to a general decline in morality as the underlying reason. Postwar promiscuity, and above all the rise in extra-marital cohabitation, caused a deterioration of the "race's healthy sexual instinct". The decline in traditional family and religious values found expression in the wanton rebellion of modern youth. This type of argument advocated the censure and control of a wide range of pernicious influences on children. Literature, pornography, the cinema and theatre, and the press, all associated with modernity, led to the "sexual excitation" of youth and brought out tendencies to anti-social behaviour.<sup>42</sup> And others perceived the problem as an urban dilemma, the result of industrialisation and social change. Undisciplined by working parents, the young grew up in the streets, this argument went, and turned to crime as a consequence.<sup>43</sup>

Apart from the discovery of the morally corrupted child, some medical research seemed to indicate congenital causes. Mental deficiency came to account for a significant proportion of juvenile crime.<sup>44</sup> The renowned psychiatrist Sante De Sanctis tried to define the attributes of the delinquent personality, with the aim of developing therapies. Inferior intelligence, rather than social conditions, left some children with severe emotional and psychological disturbances. The "abnormal" child showed a marked propensity for criminal behaviour through lack of adaptive social skills. Unbalanced from earliest infancy, they became "mal-adjusted and alienated"

adolescents and then psychopathic adults. Although he approached the problem from a clinical rather than a penal perspective, he echoed the appeal to government to establish many more educational establishments for internment with a curative purpose. Fascism could not ignore, he stated, the profound "ethical and moral obligation" to help the "intellectually unfit" become "productive workers, proud citizens and worthy soldiers". Nor could the regime deny the immense "social rewards" awaiting a government which mounted a broad campaign for the mental hygiene of youngsters.<sup>45</sup>

Promulgated on 18 October 1930, Italy's new penal code incorporated these views into the criminal justice system. Like many criminal anthropologists and psychiatrists, Alfredo Rocco believed juvenile delinquency had begun to rise long before the war. But, according to the professor of commercial law, mobilisation had aggravated the problem by causing the break-up of families. Military service had imposed a kind of institutionalised abandonment on young recruits. Orphaned and stray children also figured prominently amongst the social casualties of war. In parliament, the nationalist stated on a number of occasions that the nature of juvenile crime had changed in the postwar period. Youngsters, he stressed, now committed serious offences endangering persons, property, and even the state. Appointed Minister of Justice in 1925, Rocco determined to defend society from the growing threat of the "alarming criminality of Italian youth".<sup>46</sup>

Political considerations undoubtedly lay behind many of Rocco's revisions of the 1889 Zanardelli code. The Minister openly admitted that fascist criminal law had to be sufficiently harsh to act as a deterrent on crime and dissent. The re-introduction of the death penalty after its abolition in 1889 and sentences far more severe than those set by the previous code functioned, he stated, as a form of "overt intimidation" whose purpose was to frighten Italians into obedience. The acknowledged need to "preserve the state" caused Rocco to shift the balance of the penal system away from the idea of law enforcement to protect citizens from criminal injury or injustice.<sup>47</sup>

An innovative feature of the 1930 code was the incorporation of some principles from positivist theory. The section covering "social dangerousness" drew selectively from postwar currents in Italian criminal anthropology and psychology.<sup>48</sup> The crux of the idea of dangerousness was the enlarged power given a judge to form an opinion

about the personal qualities of a defendant and to order the segregation of that person from society because of that judgement. The concept of dangerousness posed certain problems for sentencing procedure. A murderer who committed a crime of passion would probably not be found dangerous by virtue of the extenuating circumstance. But a beggar or madman were considered very dangerous because their general behaviour threatened the ideal of a sanitised social order espoused by fascism.

Against the recommendations of his appointed review commission, Rocco introduced a whole repressive regime for the incarceration or confinement of socially undesirable persons. The Minister justified the new mixed system of punitive and psychiatric punishments by saying that "purely penal measures have proven insufficient to combat the grave and worrying upsurge of habitual delinquency, juvenile delinquency, and mental infirmity".<sup>49</sup>

The code empowered a judge to declare a person socially dangerous even when he or she was acquitted of a charge, was presumed criminally irresponsible, or was discharged from prison. Individuals most likely to be deemed injurious fell within two broad categories: those who were criminally irresponsible because they showed symptoms of mental defect or subnormal intelligence; and those who were imputable because they showed signs of moral depravity. Although causing considerable confusion, the code did give a judge the authority to declare a person dangerous even without any breach of law. Anyone with a conduct, attitude, or lifestyle considered offensive could be placed in indefinite detention. The fascist justice system did not permit right of appeal in those cases involving dangerousness. No evidence other than a full character assessment need be brought as proof of the threat to society posed by a defendant's liberty. Sufficient grounds for detention were met if a judge felt the accused was a likely candidate to commit a crime.<sup>50</sup>

Rocco preserved in principle provision for criminal irresponsibility due to mitigating circumstances, minority age, impaired reason, or mental and physical handicap. But he increased the maximum time limits on punishments set by his parliamentary committee after review of the 1929 draft. In the case of acquittal owing to mental breakdown, alcohol or drug use, deafness, or dumbness, for example, the code prescribed confinement of the accused person in a penal lunatic asylum

for a period of not less than five years. And children under criminal minority age could be placed in institutions for "re-educational internment" by virtue of misbehaviour.<sup>51</sup>

The code created a grading system of punishment according to three delinquent types: the professional, habitual, and tendencious criminal. Implicit in the code was the belief that the criminal act was an expression of the malfunctioning of the individual personality. The code imposed especially harsh sentences for recidivists, who were defined as "persons addicted to crime". A judge could pronounce a defendant a "habitual delinquent" or a "habitual misdemeanant" by reason of two previous convictions. A further offence could result in a judgement of "professional offender". And anyone, even if not a recidivist, who showed "a special predisposition towards crime" because of a "peculiarly wicked personality" could be found to be a "delinquent by tendency".<sup>52</sup>

The effects of a finding of habituality, professionalism, and tendency to delinquency entailed the application of "security measures" for preventive custody. These measures allowed the fascist justice system to send people down for lengthy sentences which did not reflect the actual gravity or brutality of the crime committed. Reclusion for a "delinquent" alcoholic could amount to a life sentence in an asylum, while a murderer could be freed on parole after serving his regular time.<sup>53</sup>

Some of Rocco's contemporaries criticised the code for this reason. The principle of predisposition to crime embodied in the articles on delinquency collapsed the entire foundation of Italian criminal law which was based on a presumption of intent. How could a criminal be responsible for his actions, critics charged, when he was delinquent by temperament and constitution.<sup>54</sup> The Minister of Justice answered these attacks by disassociating his classification from positivist theory. Delinquents were imputable, he maintained, because they were "normal". Confounding one vague premise of the new criminology, the conflation of criminality with insanity, Rocco nonetheless created more ambiguity. His definition of delinquency admitted free will but clung to a notion of crime as a reflection of a fundamental moral failing in character. His delinquent suffered from something far worse than some organic imbalance for he was "evil" by nature and choice.<sup>55</sup>

In the case of minors, Rocco enlarged the scope and severity of

punishments. The code maintained minority age at fourteen years and majority age at eighteen years, after which mitigated sentences would not be admissible. New guidelines eroded those few provisions in the 1889 penal code and the 1913 code of procedure for the establishment of a probation service to divert child offenders from institutional custody. Though Rocco made a show of his clemency towards children, the goal of correction informed the decision to enhance the "educational" aspect of retribution at the expense of so-called "pure" punishment. While both penal and educational penalties applied to responsible minors, Rocco shifted the emphasis in a rehabilitative direction. But if convicted of a crime, a child could still serve an ordinary sentence in a prison, workhouse, or agricultural colony. Upon release, however, a court could now order protective detention in a reform school under the security measures.<sup>56</sup>

A new regulation governing penal institutions came into effect on 18 June 1931. This law, together with a further enactment on 20 July 1934, re-defined the nature of punishment of child offenders. These acts specified that court buildings should have annexed facilities for the detention and treatment of all types of juvenile delinquent. The "re-education centre" should contain a psychiatric clinic, a school, a reformatory, and a minors' prison.<sup>57</sup> Most importantly, this legislation made provision for special establishments where particularly refractory children could be kept for psychological testing. The juvenile justice system under fascism sought to remove child offenders from society and place them in isolation wards where personality defects such as anti-social instincts, violence, and malevolence could be eradicated. Apart from purely punitive measures provided by prison, the reformatory, and hard labour, these enactments set a clear precedent for the application of eugenic measures such as medico-pedagogical "re-education".

The National Organisation for the Protection of Motherhood and Infancy remained somewhat aloof from these trends. Officials expressed the view that the public sector should provide assistance only for "healthy and sane children who will make a positive contribution to their race, the economy, and the nation" while private charities should care for "derelicts, incurables, and unproductive elements". Budget limitations forced ONMI to set these priorities.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, in May 1929 the organisation did negotiate with the Ministry of



Justice the terms of an agreement for the establishment of special provincial commissions to combat juvenile delinquency. Though the programme had a limited effect throughout the fascist period, some provincial federations did establish a system of home visits to compile "hereditary and environmental data" about defendants. Evidence concerning the character and background of minors, bearing on a verdict of habituality especially, was now admissable in court proceedings.<sup>69</sup>

These developments gave a boost to the advance of so-called forensic medicine, which at this period was a peculiar blend of phrenological, anthropological, and psychological ideas. Practitioners compiled case biographies, based on "somato-psychic investigations". For the collection of data about home life, questions concerning the morality and health of family members prevailed; personal details focused on bad habits such as smoking, gambling, film-going, and reading of adventure stories to establish whether the child had fallen under the sway of corrupting influences. And physical examinations assessed sexual development and "biotype" to determine congenital causes. Finally, experts completed a personality profile of the individual which gave a list of all defects. Facts about low mental age, high suggestibility, and emotional instability affected the final judgement about the delinquent's level of social dangerousness.<sup>60</sup>

ONMI did participate in this "therapeutic" movement. With the involvement of local police and private charities, some ONMI federations in mainly northern provinces created child detention and observation centres. By 1935, local money and private venues had been found for 24 such specialised institutions though forensic medicine was now officially practiced in reformatories throughout the nation as well. These establishments housed "delinquent, degenerate, and disturbed" children awaiting trial or sentencing. Together with a magistrate and a representative from ONMI, medical staff included a specialist in criminal anthropology and one expert in psychiatry. The purpose of these centres was to diagnose the causes of delinquency by examining each individual for symptoms of abnormality. Intelligence tests were given to children who appeared mentally deficient; skull measurements were taken of physically handicapped offenders; psychiatric investigations were made of children deprived of "material and moral" family support who then turned to crime.<sup>61</sup>

Between 1931 and 1934, 1,404 male and 60 female children mostly between the ages of twelve and eighteen were examined in those institutions under ONMI supervision alone. Biological and psychiatric testing found that the vast majority of delinquents suffered from some form of hereditary predisposition due to immoral, alcoholic, and psychopathological family traits. Out of one sample of 189 minors with especially pronounced personality disorders, a proportion were judged "sick and dangerous" but worthy of social re-education in a reformatory; these comprised 41 children who were found to have low intelligence and 19 to have severe emotional problems. In Rome, during a six-month period beginning in November 1934, authorities admitted 119 young convicts (of whom 36 were suspected "habitual delinquents") to a neuropsychiatric clinic and indefinitely detained (under the security measures) 19 of those minors deemed irreparably mal-adjusted. None of the children had committed serious offences. Many were without family contact; and most had been unemployed and homeless at the time of arrest. The ones found to be "normal" were given over to penal institutions to serve their full sentences.<sup>62</sup>

That child poverty could contribute significantly to juvenile crime was clear from police reports. The regime was fearful of urban unrest and disorder. After 1926, government gave the police broad powers to stop minors in the streets on suspicion of criminal intent or vagrancy, a term covering anything from homelessness to hooliganism.<sup>63</sup> The "public security" measures permitted the police to question and detain youths without bringing official charges. Especially in places like Milan, which had a notorious reputation as one of the nation's most "delinquent" cities, dragnet operations increased in frequency and scope. By the next decade, the police claimed that about 27,000 children were stopped in the streets of major metropolitan centres annually; and of those subsequently arrested, the overwhelming majority were charged with crimes of vagrancy, begging, and prostitution.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, general levels of convictions for vagabondage, begging, and alcoholism, categorised as offences against public decency, far outpaced those for any other crimes throughout the thirties.<sup>65</sup>

ONMI alone reported that the organisation had helped to recover 18,068 homeless children nationwide between 1926 and 1931. Foster parents were very difficult to find, especially in southern and

northern regions, so institutional confinement was often the only option available. A proportion of these children were found to be "corrupted:" over 1,270 were placed in private mental institutions; care orders were given to over 4,750 for recovery in public psychiatric hospitals; and 1,750 were put into custody within houses of correction.<sup>66</sup> This level of child abandonment clearly reflected profound disruptions to family life wrought by severe economic hardship.

Although child labour rose during the depression due to the preference of employers to keep wages down, children younger than fifteen who would normally contribute to the household were now finding it harder to find stable work. In some provinces especially hard hit by mass unemployment, the party actually evaded restrictions to combat the illegal employment of children. As part of an informal policy to help impoverished families, PNF officials ordered prefects to issue temporary work permits dismissing children from school and allowing them to do banned jobs, such as night-time shifts in factories.<sup>67</sup>

Abandonment of minors was undoubtedly a huge problem in fascist Italy. Annually about 8,000 adolescents who had been reclaimed as illegitimate infants found themselves destitute and alone.<sup>68</sup> Despite the severity of sentences for parental abandonment, and the increasing publicity given such cases in the press, the regime failed to put a stop to the spread of this "moral contagion". Evidence suggests that financial pressures on poor families and single-parent households put children in a very precarious position.<sup>69</sup>

Minors existed in the shadows of the system of protective statutory provision provided by ONMI and the law. Assistance towards "needy, abused, abnormal, or delinquent" adolescents fell back mainly onto private institutions outside ONMI's direct jurisdiction despite the norms set by the 1925 regulation. Residential charities such as orphanages, shelters, and colleges had the capacity to house only about one out of every six children referred by ONMI.<sup>70</sup> Over-crowding and chaos prevailed everywhere. For lack of space and an efficient system of checks, under-age children were put into adult mental asylums, minors were placed in adult prisons, abandoned children were sent to reformatories, and psychiatric patients were given over to workhouses.<sup>71</sup> For that reason, the real number of children who fell

victim to the vagaries of this bleak and neglectful system remains invisible in official statistics.

That the fascist government could claim one achievement was no accident however. By the end of the thirties, the total population of children in psychiatric and penal institutions had risen considerably over the course of the previous two decades. Out of a total prison population of 327,036, 14,144 mostly male children were interned in 1938, and over 4,000 more boys were detained in reform schools. When fascism came to power in 1922, Italy's penal and correctional establishments had held 3,643 minors, over 5,000 fewer than had been incarcerated at the turn of the century.<sup>72</sup> And up markedly from the preceding period, the number of "deficient and degenerate" children confined in institutions for both the "educable" and the "incurable" averaged about 2,000 a year during the fascist period, and numbered well over 50,000 by 1938, according to the most conservative estimates.<sup>73</sup>

*From Public Beneficence to Social Services: The Roman Experiment, 1927-1932*

ONMI began to implement welfare policy towards illegitimates in August 1927. The national leadership decided to launch a pilot scheme in Rome as a model for the other 91 provincial federations. A member of ONMI's Roman central directorate, Daisy di Robilant, a Piedmontese Countess, offered to organise this effort. Her plans focused on the expansion of existing forms of aid into a comprehensive system of what she and other ONMI officials defined as "social services".<sup>74</sup> Attempting to break the hold foundling homes had and go beyond wetnursing as the main form of provision, she proposed to encourage more women to reclaim. What distinguished her plans was the emphasis she placed on "positive" incentives to take the place of the tough regimes imposed under liberalism. Better than enforced feeding in her opinion, a system of rewards and benefits would attract women to reclamation. In addition to giving direct economic aid, ONMI should, she believed, integrate medical and social services, and thereby provide unwed mothers with continuous care beginning in early pregnancy and ending only when the child reached late infancy.

A founder of the national Mothers' Aid Society, an independent charity which provided temporary shelter for homeless single mothers, and an international campaigner for childrens' rights, the Countess

expressed very strong views about the direction policy should go.<sup>75</sup> A committed supporter of welfare programmes, she believed the state had a moral obligation to care generously for unmarried mothers and their children. Especially since Italian women did not have any right to seek paternity support, she maintained, the state had to provide meaningful alternatives to forms of private maintenance which were permitted in democratic countries. She reminded Mussolini that abortion and contraception were illegal in fascist Italy. For this reason, she declared, government could not ignore the plight of the "pariahs born outside marriage", a "social surplus of infants" which its own laws had helped to create.<sup>76</sup>

Although willing to express frank opinions, Daisy di Robilant remained cautious when it came to open criticism of the party line. She did present herself as a "fascist by true faith". But her approach was rather more pragmatic than ideological in inspiration. She never submitted to the blind fealty characterising relations between other ONMI officials and the Duce. She did acknowledge though the political objectives behind welfare. Like her colleagues, she depicted aid to unwed mothers as a means to an end rather than a good in itself. The Countess defined her aims as the promotion of what she called "responsible unwed motherhood". Benefits were not free hand-outs by a paternal and benevolent state; in return for support, she stated, public providers expected unwed mothers to "breast-feed and rear healthy children for the race". Moreover welfare recipients should never come to perceive entitlement to benefits as a "right" accorded by the "fascist welfare revolution". Social assistance, by her own definition, was a "privilege" bestowed the worthy few who fulfilled fascism's demographic aspirations.<sup>77</sup>

The Countess attempted to convince her colleagues that social assistance had to be broad in scope. She looked to the long-term savings to be had in sustaining stable single-parent families. She did agree that some kind of restrictive qualifications had to be maintained in the interests of economy. Subsidies to women living with waged workers, to women who had a history of illegitimate childbearing, and to women who refused outright to comply with the breast-feeding rule were at best a waste, she believed, and at worst an incentive to extra-marital promiscuity. But she advocated these limits so that she could better provide more substantive rewards for

the most needy. Each case had to be assessed for worthiness, she stressed, and benefit schemes had to be flexible enough to accommodate individual needs. This approach differed radically from official policy.<sup>78</sup>

Daisy di Robilant refused to follow what she saw as a short-sighted and doomed policy of cutting corners to keep expenditure low. And because she believed some women truly needed help, she advocated individual assessment as the most reasonable way to restrict access to welfare. This highly personal social vision clashed from the start with the rigidity of policy design. She repeatedly told her ONMI colleagues that not all unwed mothers were alike though the law seemed to treat them as such. She wanted to give preferential treatment not to those who burdened society with one bastard baby after another, she explained, but to under-age runaways, victims of rape, homeless girls, and those women who expressed a keen desire to raise their children. The state had to be willing to provide a real income support to offset the social and economic costs of single parenthood in a society where unwed motherhood was still so stigmatised.<sup>79</sup>

Her highest ambition was the abolition of all legal distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate children, a goal shared by others both within and outside the ONMI hierarchy. Organised by Regina Teruzzi, the president of the national *Massaie Rurali* federation, this campaign put pressure on the Ministry of Justice to eradicate the nomenclature "*figlio d'ignoto, ignota, d'ignoti*" (child of unknown parentage) and "*figlio di N.N.*" (child of no one) from all civil registration documents. The movement focused attention on the discriminatory aspects of customary procedure. Activists pressed for birth certificates to show the names of fictitious parents, a proposal to further the gradual integration of illegitimates into society. And in the case of reclamation by one parent, they argued, the reclaiming parent should be able to record the name of the other parent in the act. The Ministry of Justice saw these proposals as too premature and radical. This campaign for what adherents called a more "humane" approach failed to achieve more than minor amendments in 1926 and 1932 to the body of laws covering civil status.<sup>80</sup>

Even otherwise staunch defenders of fascism within the ONMI leadership found fault with this aspect of policy. Both Baron Alberto Blanc, ONMI's first president, and Sileno Fabbri, the Milanese lawyer

who succeeded him in January 1932, expressed the opinion that these and other reforms would make the work of welfare far simpler. The Italian parliament had equivocated for far too long on the matters of adoption, affiliation, foster parenthood, and paternity, they pointed out. By bringing these issues out into the open, they argued, the regime could do much to change people's attitudes towards illegitimacy. They urged the government to combat tradition and prejudice for the benefit of demographic policy. From a practical point of view, they maintained, it made sense to remove some of the emotional pressures on women to abandon their babies. And legal recognition of "surrogate families", they stressed, would provide acceptable alternatives to abandonment.<sup>61</sup>

To these recommendations, Daisy di Robilant added criticism of the logic of fascist policy. She focused her attention on the distinction between assistance towards legitimates and illegitimates written into ONMI's 1925 regulation. The provision of statutory aid for unwed mothers as a distinct group, she stated, aroused public resentment over an alleged favouritism shown "sinners" over "respectable" married women.<sup>62</sup> And the segregation of illegitimate children and their mothers into a separate sector of services crippled welfare organisation. The dual structure, she reasoned, effectively doubled the costs of provision. The Countess advocated the integration of welfare into a system serving the needs of people without regard to civil status.<sup>63</sup>

There was some consensus amongst the ONMI leadership about the nagging blindspots in law and policy. Along with high-ranking ONMI leaders, Daisy di Robilant held that the regime worked at cross-purposes with the organisation by averting the larger implications of illegitimacy policy. But with regard to the particulars of welfare implementation, Daisy stood alone. Although she attempted to conform to most aspects of official ONMI policy, Daisy di Robilant voiced her awareness of its limitations. She identified the main objective of maternal reclamation as a significant weakness in the 1927 legislation.<sup>64</sup>

She saw observance of this principle as incompatible with her commitment to providing the best quality care possible for unwed mothers. According to her own research, stable extra-marital couplement leading to illegitimate childbearing rose considerably in

the postwar period. But she differed from most other ONMI officials in her interpretation of the causes. A high proportion of her claimants had durable mock marriages with men, she told ONMI colleagues. Many of these women complained to her about financial constraints as their chief obstacle to formalising unions. In response to these testimonies, Daisy saw poverty as a contributing factor to illegitimacy and a significant impediment to marriage.<sup>66</sup>

Heedless to the ONMI leadership in Rome, Daisy di Robilant devised a new benefit scheme to remedy this problem. Without the full endorsement of her superiors, the Countess began to offer unwed mothers a marriage premium in late 1928. Between 600 and 800 *lire*, depending on the urgency of each case, the benefit was large enough to assist a newly-wed couple to set up household. The scarcity of affordable housing, and the extra burden of childcare, she believed, frightened many men from marriage. The premium covered the full cost of a deposit and one month's rent in modest accommodation. Alternatively, the couple could use the money to buy a "marriage bed" and other furnishings, and still have some funds left over for extra expenses on baby clothing and bedding. On top of this substantial cash payment, Daisy gave out a "rearing premium" to especially needy women. Because women lost entitlement to nursing subsidies once they married, this grant helped to ease the anxiety some felt about child support. Daisy defined this provision as an occasional hardship allowance, an essential security for families for unforeseen emergencies like unemployment or sickness. Neither the marriage nor the rearing premiums was a fixed award; Daisy reserved the right to adjust the amount of the sums to the changing needs and circumstances of her clientele.<sup>66</sup>

Opposed by ONMI officialdom who thought public money was better spent on subsidies alone, Daisy improvised many of her more innovative initiatives. Demand for marriage premiums increased even during the economic crisis, convincing her that policy was achieving desirable results.<sup>67</sup> The Countess opened up the nation's first public marriage bureau in 1929 providing free legal and social services to unwed mothers and their partners. Her small staff of volunteers did all the preparatory work of collecting documents from parish and civil record offices. Often at her own expense, Daisy offered to cover the fees for the processing and registration of marriage and legitimation acts. She



took especial care to court the approval of parish priests. While at first she encountered resistance because of what she interpreted as their moral outrage over "subsidising unwed motherhood", she soon won many local churchmen to her side. She needed their support to help persuade Catholic women to undergo a civil ceremony on top of a religious wedding, a practice only slowly gaining ground in former Papal territories.<sup>88</sup>

Fascist planning or central directives had nothing to do with these spontaneous initiatives. Despite the protestations of ONMI officialdom, Daisy made flexibility and responsiveness two features of her administration. In her defense, the Countess showed that the organisation could make a substantial savings on the long-term costs of care. She gave out 600 to 800 *lire* marriage premiums instead of nursing subsidies, which then averaged just under 100 *lire* a month in Rome for first-year babies. While the foundling home paid 75 percent and ONMI 25 percent of the subsidy, the *per capita* cost amounted to 1,500 *lire* on average for one year of maintenance. She matched the economic achievement of almost halving public spending with considerable success in social terms. Between 1929 and 1932, almost 25 percent of the mothers in her case load married and legitimated their babies, a figure well over three times the national average.<sup>89</sup>

The ONMI provincial leadership remained totally unimpressed despite these remarkable results. This clash of views reflected a larger problem, the rigid and short-sighted nature of fascist welfare policy. The Countess responded to criticisms about her independent initiatives by complaining of the "stifling bizantinism and oppressive bureaucratisation" of ONMI administration. Afforded some measure of autonomy if not official approbation, Daisy was nonetheless subjected to disciplinary bullying precisely because she chose to shape policy to fit the needs of her clientele. In a moment of ironic candour, the Countess reflected: "would it not be rather strange that if by threatening my marriage service with closure, the regime is actually encouraging illegitimacy?"<sup>90</sup>

Daisy's organisational acumen had more to do with the success of her programmes than state sponsorship did. She kept administrative expenditure low largely through personal contacts, hard work, and a business sense. From her offices in the headquarters of ONMI's provincial federation, Daisy di Robilant ran a tight organisation

based on a small volunteer staff. Her illegitimacy centre, a separate department within ONMI, absorbed her former charity's institutional network. This included two women's residential shelters, a mothers' kitchen, and two obstetric and paediatric clinics, all on premises donated by private philanthropists. Money covering the cost of construction of both the mothers' homes came from a low-cost loan provided by the national *Cassa Maternità*, a contribution which Daisy secured through a friendship with a senator.<sup>91</sup> The Countess arranged for inexpensive bulk food and provision for the refectories by negotiating special concessionary rates with workers' co-operatives and municipal government.<sup>92</sup> When available, vegetables produced locally on farms run by the *Massaie Rurali* were sold to her on a discount. In times of scarcity, the Countess herself paid food bills at full retail rates.<sup>93</sup> Overheads on the clinics were kept minimal because they functioned mainly as dispensaries for minor medicines, food packets and powdered milk. Many of these products came cheaply from left-over stock owned by the provincial administration of public hospitals. Daisy managed the deal by putting pressure on these authorities.<sup>94</sup>

The maintenance cost of the mothers' homes was low. On an annual average, the Countess provided housing for 150 pregnant women and 120 nursing mothers and their children for maximum three-month stays. All the residents worked in the institutions' own workshops and split the profits made on sale of their sewed goods with management. Added to this were occasional funds from fines collected for disciplinary infractions by residents, as well as any personal contributions for room and board which the women or their families could make. And together with a volunteer staff of nuns, both enterprises were virtually self-financing. The small yearly award the homes received from ONMI did not equal the beneficent endowment raised through public donation. In 1931, the governing board found balancing the budget especially difficult given rising inflation. Despite a petition to Mussolini, which included signatures and salutations from the residents themselves, a request for a special discretionary grant from the government's social fund was rejected.<sup>95</sup>

Located on the same site as one of the mothers' homes in the centre of Rome, the refectory served also as a profit-making workers' cafe. Women residents gathered daily in the dining hall for an early lunch

before noon when the premises opened for paying customers. Some of the cost for the provision of free meals came from ONMI's provincial budget which set a monthly rate based on *per capita* consumption. Because this quota remained fixed while food costs constantly rose during the depression, Daisy had to authorise regular price hikes for workers' meals. She charged "more for less" when meat or bread periodically became scarce, she reported. When she found foodstuffs in especially short supply, she complained to ONMI officials about their lack of concern. Her refectory was not entitled to purchase the food distributed to the kitchens run directly by ONMI. The organisation did not help to meet the costs of rent, personnel, heating or electricity. For general repairs, and for cutting wood for stoves and ovens, she relied on the workers who patronised her establishment.<sup>96</sup>

Daisy di Robilant boasted of the devotion she inspired in her volunteers. The women she gathered around her were all as equally wealthy and as well-connected as she was. The unpaid work they did went far beyond the standards set by law. As evidence of this in her annual reports to the ONMI leadership, Daisy outlined the nature of the types of social services her centre routinely offered. Apart from arranging marriages, her staff found jobs for the husbands of clients, located housing through private and public associations, and paid the passage for Italian immigrants abroad to be re-united with their pregnant lovers at home. Many of their clients were adolescents, and some of these came from troubled families. Most minors resided in outlying rural areas and migrated to Rome after they had been kicked out or had run away from home because of unwanted pregnancy. Daisy's volunteers attempted to reconcile families when they could secure their clients a safe environment after birth.<sup>97</sup>

Public welfare programmes, she repeatedly reminded her ONMI colleagues, had to be truly "social" if the state were to succeed "in gaining the adhesion of the masses". She claimed that whereas few women in Rome had yet heard of ONMI, much less come to see the state as a provider, she could reach local communities by making welfare aim at improving the quality of lives of people. Part of the reason for this, she explained, was that she recognised the importance of continuity of care, follow-up social work, and close contact with recipients for the success of the benefit scheme.<sup>98</sup>

Not all of her initiatives were popular. Daisy reluctantly admitted

that home visits which she began in 1929 were deeply resented by her clientele. The reason for this was the fact that the system was not designed for health or safety checks for the benefit of recipients. The purpose was to find welfare frauds. Those mothers who had reclaimed their children were required to pick up nursing subsidies once a month on a specified pay day.<sup>99</sup> Daisy and her staff scrutinised them closely for details of dress and appearance which might show changing fortunes. They believed some women feigned poverty while others lied. Daisy identified domestic servants as a "maternally unreliable" group who privately farmed out infants with the help of employers. And a particularly prolific but "demographically undesirable" group comprised the "inveterate recidivists", often women over forty who "speculate in bastard babies". With two or more farmed-out infants, they lived comfortably "in moral decrepitude" with income support on top of earnings from working lovers.<sup>100</sup>

Daisy di Robilant identified a marked tendency amongst certain women to become welfare dependent as a consequence of the 1927 legislation. In her 35 years of experience, she remarked, she had never seen such a high proportion of cases involving repeated non-marital pregnancies in such rapid succession.<sup>101</sup> National data concerning fertility patterns by age and civil status do not exist. But Daisy's finding seems to be confirmed in official statistics covering causes of death for women in the older age bracket. Throughout the fascist period, general levels of maternal mortality remained stationary. Unmarried women as a whole were far more likely than married women to die because of birth-related accident, infection, or other complications. This differential actually increased after 1930. But the highest proportional rise in maternal mortality by age-group and civil status affected unmarried middle-aged women.<sup>102</sup> It seems reasonable to deduce from both aggregate data and Daisy's qualitative evidence that the regime's pronatalist policy may have had some selective impact. Perhaps single and widowed women between the ages of 40 and 55 were indeed prolonging and increasing the frequency of childbearing. They certainly suffered an otherwise unaccountable rise in the risk of death due to childbirth.

Home visits were designed to discover whether a woman was living with a man and whether she was rearing her child. Daisy di Robilant proudly related that her visitors raided homes in the small hours of

the morning, an especially effective but much hated strategy of surprise. The work of the home visitors was not all unpleasant though. They did provide a vital link in the theretofore loose bond between the foundling home and farmed-out infants. Unlike foundling home inspectors who were notoriously bad at their job, the visitors kept in close contact with abandoned babies sent out to wetnurse. Daisy di Robilant also did much to improve rates of survival amongst farmed-out infants by urging homes to employ only registered nurses. And because of this, the visitors were able to assist those women who re-appeared to reclaim their children from foster care, sometimes after years had lapsed.<sup>103</sup>

Relations between Daisy's centre and ONMI became increasingly strained as the depression deepened. By early 1932, the effects of economic crisis imposed new financial constraints on welfare expenditure and threatened to undermine Daisy's experiment. In her correspondence to Mussolini, Daisy di Robilant unsuccessfully asked for official recognition of her marriage premiums.<sup>104</sup> ONMI provincial officialdom intervened by setting a new lower ceiling on the amount of the award and restricting acceptable quotas. Marriage premiums became less substantial although Daisy had trouble keeping the numbers given out down. This situation compromised the main function of the premiums with the result that fewer couples married and legitimated children.<sup>105</sup>

The value of monthly subsidies to both nursing mothers and wetnurses also fell markedly in late 1931. Daisy begrudgingly imposed new austerity measures. She tried to compensate for reduced subsidies by giving out larger benefits in kind, such as powdered milk and food parcels. Mothers, she claimed, sold these goods to neighbours, a symptom of hardship which she failed to prevent. And as part of the economising trend, mothers now had to collect vouchers in place of the cash payments they formerly received; and these were now given out on a weekly basis. In a bid to control spending on subsidies and increase monitoring of welfare abuses, ONMI required women to encash these promissory notes at the organisation's communal committees.<sup>106</sup> This transfer of authority marked the beginning of the end for Daisy's project.

This procedure caused consternation amongst women who felt they were not getting enough from the state. ONMI communal committees

reported back to provincial headquarters that disturbances were breaking out with some frequency and that the organisation was rapidly losing credibility.<sup>107</sup> The passage of control confused matters as ONMI communal authorities required more documentation from claimants than the centre had done. Proof of settlement and poverty, as well as authorisation from the provincial federation, now came to be standard features of subsidy provision. A significant backlog of payments clogged the machinery of welfare and women now regularly faced long arrears. The Countess pointed out to her colleagues that many mothers were homeless and penniless so delays in payment only jeopardised the life of infants. She stated in one of her reports: "I have been under the mistaken impression all these years that the regime wants us to *far vivere* (to help children survive) and not just to *far nascere* (increase the birthrate)". Daisy warned that her loss of authority meant she could no longer keep a close watch over the movement of women and children. Regular clients, she reported, simply disappeared rather than deal with the new system.<sup>108</sup> The Holy Spirit foundling home in Rome confirmed the suspicion that abandonment was rising. The director reported that record numbers of women were asking for aid and as a consequence the home had to seek out wetnurses farther afield than ever before. The enlarged wetnurse radius, he stated, eroded the home's fragile network of home inspections to check on the well-being of babies.<sup>109</sup> The character of welfare had become increasingly impersonal and bureaucratic as the system formalised into chaos.

The work of the illegitimacy centre unravelled between 1932 and 1934. Daisy did make an energetic effort to salvage her initiatives despite financial constraints. Overcrowding in the mothers' homes failed to accommodate the strain of growing social demand. A new mothers' residence which opened in Monterotundo in 1932 absorbed some of the spillover from the centre. The exclusive establishment refused entry to prostitutes, foreigners, and later "non-latin" women, and functioned mainly as a refuge for middle-class, fee-paying guests. But through informal agreement between the governing body and the Countess, the institution created a separate ward for some of Daisy's more urgent referrals.<sup>110</sup> And another maternal albergo which had opened in April 1930 in Ostia Marina also offered some of Daisy's clients temporary shelter.<sup>111</sup>

Declaring the 1927 ruling on mandatory early recovery a "farce",

the Countess confronted obstruction from institutions directly under ONMI control. Public hospitals refused entry to her clients claiming inavailability of beds and ONMI's clinics did not allow unwed mothers to attend for fear of offending respectable married women. When an epidemic of cholera broke out in the city of Rome, panic ensued amongst public health authorities. Her clients were seen as "suspected carriers of contagion" so even ONMI *consultori* closed their doors. Low maternal mortality amongst her clients had been one of her proudest achievements. In 1931, none of the women she had helped that year had died in childbirth, a accomplishment she accredited to the food and shelter the centre provided for them during their pregnancies. The following year, the Countess reported that many of her clients were falling ill during pregnancy. Childbed deathrates rose and more women declined to breast-feed for lack of adequate milk. To compensate for the obvious failings in the system of protracted care, Daisy di Robilant began to make private arrangements with families to provide emergency accommodation for homeless women awaiting birth. Likening these frantic searches to begging, the Countess recounted in her reports how humiliating the matter was for both herself and her clients. And she offered these women three free meals a day at her refectory in a desperate attempt to maintain some semblance of prenatal provision.<sup>112</sup>

She also openly encouraged women to defer reclamation until after pocketing a substantial portion of their nursing subsidies. This defiance of ONMI directives did not bode well for the future of her centre. While advised to keep marriage premiums low, the Countess did occasionally offer a larger subsidy than the now standard 300 *lire* benefit. Although she pointed out that few couples would marry for a one-off, paltry award when they stood to gain more on the long-term from nursing subsidies, the ONMI leadership failed to listen. Rankling officialdom even further, she attempted to uphold a certain elasticity of payment by still fluctuating subsidies and premiums according to need. Evidence of the escalating momentum of welfare decline, nonetheless, nursing subsidies shrank to less than 25 *lire* by 1934. And the stipend was no longer doubled when a woman had twins. The best ONMI could now do was to provide new mothers with a single benefit for one baby and to offer to send the other out to wetnurse at the standard lower rate, which was then set at 18 *lire*.<sup>113</sup>

In early 1934, the Countess disorganised the mainstay of her unique system of social assistance. She fired her home visitors in March so this form of domiciliary service ceased to exist.<sup>114</sup> The state provision which she had attempted to consolidate became further attenuated as the foundling home re-asserted itself as the institutional focus of welfare. Fewer and fewer women married or reclaimed infants. Many did not bother with ONMI at all but went directly to the foundling home instead to abandon their babies. The crisis of confidence in ONMI which the Countess had begun to sense as early as 1931 spiralled into a loss of all purpose. And the spectacular failure to sustain social programmes and reach even minimal policy targets came to be blamed away as evidence of the Countess' misrule of public money. When ONMI's provincial headquarters moved to grander buildings at the end of 1932, the leadership left Daisy's offices behind. This conspicuous affront did not dampen Daisy's nerve for the Countess continued to champion her cause.<sup>115</sup> Her centre survived for a while though truncated from ONMI administration. In the summer of 1936, Mussolini personally intervened to order the closure of her Mothers' Aid Society on the grounds that Daisy was providing an unsatisfactory service which was incompatible with the higher aims of the government. In her defense, the Countess claimed that if her institution was deficient, it was for lack of resources and not for want of effort. And no matter how inadequate her care could be, she stated, foundling homes far outdid her in incompetence. While their directors fiddled with the figures on infant mortality to gain favour with the regime, she charged, her greatest weakness had always been to admit openly to the faults in the system.<sup>116</sup> The brief but most promising era of welfare reform under fascism had come to a less than dignified end.

***Dismantling Services Nationwide in the Aftermath of Reform, 1933-1938***

When first put into effect in 1927, the legislation on illegitimates had received widespread support. Out of a total of 91 provinces, 73 had voluntarily undertaken to initiate a mixed benefit scheme with provision for both reclamation and nursing subsidies.<sup>117</sup> But by 1930, ONMI owed two years in back payments to provincial governments so many of them refused to comply with policy any longer. ONMI central leadership saw policy implementation quickly deteriorate as provinces suspended programmes because of the huge debts



accumulated in their budgets. Protesting to the Council of State, provincial deputations won an appeal for immediate reimbursement from ONMI in January 1930. When the organisation failed to fork out the revenue, the union of provincial deputations again turned to state authority and won another appeal in February 1931. Only 19 provincial governments remained in support of the illegitimacy programme following these decisions but they severely restricted services by allocating monies for the bare essentials. Although they withdrew funding for planning new projects, they still found maintaining the system of nursing subsidies alone rather difficult. The others made use of provision in the 1930 and 1931 rulings to abrogate altogether their statutory responsibility to carry this expenditure in their budgets.<sup>118</sup>

ONMI could not sustain the burden of the campaign. The money spent on this one programme alone amounted to almost 70 percent of all spending and paralysed the organisation's accounts. ONMI's president, Baron Blanc secured an emergency government grant in 1931 by beseeching Mussolini for help. Drawn from the social fund created by collection of the celibacy tax, this injection of quick cash failed to put ONMI's finances aright.<sup>119</sup> The organisation's enormous deficit swallowed the over 65 million *lire* advance but ONMI's debts still grew while costs feverishly mounted. Some confusion arose about where all of ONMI's funding was going. In 1930, the organisation had raised over 150 million *lire* in private donations alone and yet leaders complained of acute money shortages. In only one of the many parliamentary debates on ONMI's financial future, a deputy raised the issue of the organisation's efficiency. On the 9 April 1931, discussion focused on whether ONMI should reduce administrative expenditure in the interests of social welfare spending. But the leaders of ONMI did not see cutting the bureaucracy down to size as a realistic solution to the crisis.<sup>120</sup>

The decision taken by ONMI's leadership was to restrict indefinitely all expenditure on welfare programmes. On 15 June 1932, Mussolini received ONMI delegates assembled in the Campidoglio for the organisation's first national convention. ONMI's new president, Sileno Fabbri made a speech which signalled the end of the old era of optimism and marked the beginning of a new era of resignation. Abandoning the former rhetoric, Fabbri spoke little of welfare

revolution. He mentioned the organisation's insurmountable economic troubles which necessitated, he stated, that ONMI take a more "gradual and patient" approach to all the work ahead. The public's increasing awareness of ONMI, he believed, accounted more for the gravity of the financial crisis than single programmes. Because of rising demand, the organisation found itself spending more to provide only desultory and casual assistance. To ameliorate ONMI's financial situation, Fabbri proposed major cutbacks and suspensions affecting all social programmes. Although the organisation had barely got off the ground in many areas, he admitted, the economic crisis meant provincial leaders would have to spend less money more efficiently.<sup>121</sup> To renegotiate the terms of illegitimacy policy stood out as a major priority for the national leadership who approved a resolution to review the 1927 legislation. From the recommendations passed at this convention emerged the law of 13 April 1933.

By de-centralising services once more, the revision law of April 1933 dissolved the system of social assistance created by the 1927 act. The enactment effectively re-introduced the structure of local authority control over social welfare first devised in the liberal period. The administration of aid towards reclaimed children now passed from ONMI control onto the begrudging backs of provincial government. ONMI still cared directly for unwed mothers however, while the communes and provinces together provided for abandoned and reclaimed infants. One problem with this new organisation was that, when implemented in May, no one quite knew what to do. Newborn illegitimates came under provincial administration though those born before the enactment stayed with ONMI. The provision fragmented welfare amongst competing authorities and separated services for mothers from those for children. If the 1927 law encouraged administrative struggles over payment, this law too invited opposition and chaos.<sup>122</sup>

The chief aim behind the amendment, to lessen the financial stake ONMI had in illegitimacy relief, did not come to be. Designed to reduce ONMI's spending, the legislation did just the opposite. Although provincial administrations now determined for themselves how money was allocated, ONMI was still required to contribute a third of the overall costs of the programmes. The transfer of authority to provincial governments may have relaxed pressures on ONMI to perform,

but the new regime provided the organisation with little control over expenditure. Even after 1933, ONMI not only remained insolvent but also saw its deficit grow ever larger because of this single outlay. While the total number of women and children assisted dropped from over 550,000 in 1932 to 69,905 in 1933, the amount ONMI spent actually rose considerably. And while spending continued to increase progressively between 1934 and 1938, the number of aid recipients re-stabilised at around 100,000 a year on average.<sup>123</sup>

A significant drawback to the 1933 legislation, funding procedure overlooked regional disparities in resources. In rich provinces like Milan, local government could match ONMI's contribution with an equally hefty share in provision. In 1928, provincial government and ONMI together had begun to replace the foundling home system with a new structure of assistance unifying all services for illegitimates into one department. The new 'institute for the protection of assistance towards illegitimate infants' functioned much as Daisy's centre did though the administration and staff were larger. The prime aim of the institute differed however from that of the Roman centre. In Milan, the strength of welfare organisation lay in the great diversity of forms of assistance. The institute ran sewing classes for unwed mothers, held summer camps for abandoned adolescents, and even housed a cinema for single-parent families. But the substance and impact of these initiatives did not compare favourably with the hard cash Daisy di Robilant gave her clients. Marriage and reclamation premiums never amounted to more than a minor expense in Milan, and the size of nursing subsidies on offer did not equal those given by Daisy even in her bad years. ONMI's financial crash in 1932 caused provision in Milan to drift further away from direct economic benefits. A Milanese lawyer, ONMI's president, Sileno Fabbri, made sure the provincial federation he had previously run now followed his directives. The subsidies Milan offered after 1933 were far lower than those given in poorer southern areas like Bari, Catania, and Trapani.<sup>124</sup>

In especially disadvantaged areas, the 1933 legislation, much like the 1927 law, did little to help deprived public authorities meet local needs. ONMI's federation in Mantua province did not start making any contribution to the illegitimacy programme until 1930. Because of high unemployment during the depression, much of the organisation's resources were devoted to alms-giving to relieve hardship. The budget

consisted primarily of expenditure for food, wood, and clothing for the poor. As the economic crisis worsened, ONMI leadership in Mantua had trouble dealing with growing numbers of abandoned infants and children, a symptom, they believed, of the disruptive effects of severe deprivation. A small reclamation premium, on top of a monthly subsidy of 25 *lire* for a few of their claimants comprised the best they could do as the province lacked any foundling home. Although putting the burden on them to fulfill the promises of illegitimacy policy, the 1933 act did not mean much for Mantuan authorities since public welfare hardly existed at all.<sup>125</sup>

An official government inquest completed in 1940 showed just how little the state provided. The National Organisation for the Protection of Motherhood and Infancy was found to be a heavy and inefficient bureaucracy which had realised few of the aims of illegitimacy policy. Prenatal care for unwed mothers was a myth outside big cities and mandatory recovery averaged only about 10 days rather than the 3 months specified by law. For this reason, the study concluded, maternal mortality levels for unmarried mothers still far outpaced those for married women. Together with these shortcomings, investigations revealed that forms of income support designed to close the subsistence gap between single-parent and dual-parent families had failed to achieve a decent standard. In only 5 out of 91 provinces in 1938 did unwed mothers who reclaimed receive subsidies deemed "sufficient to guarantee, at least in theory, the very minimum requirements for infant survival". Only 23 provinces made provision for reclamation premiums and these varied from between 10 and 50 *lire*. Far less common in practice, marriage premiums seldom went as high as the 800 *lire* Daisy gave out ten years before. Most averaged between 300 and 500 *lire*. And across the nation, infant mortality amongst those infants born outside marriage still differed so dramatically from those born within the institution. Despite social programmes to redress this imbalance, deathrates for illegitimate infants were double that for legitimate infants in some provinces.<sup>126</sup> In a country where pronatalism governed all domestic policy initiatives, the failure to sustain infant life seems all the more striking.

#### ***'Surrogate' Families and Abandonment***

Both public and private law in Italy changed only slowly with regard to 'illegitimates'. Beginning in 1865 with the kingdom's first

unified civil code, lawmakers adhered tenaciously to a moral belief in the 'natural' and hence 'legitimate' family'. The juridical foundation of Italian family order, *patria potestas* defined the duties of fatherhood. The three pillars of a father's exercise of *patria potestas* were to provide support, guidance, and formal education for his children. In his project for reform of the civil code presented to parliament in April 1923, the then Minister of Justice, Aldo Oviglio proposed some major amendments to this concept of paternal responsibility. The law, he maintained, had to keep pace with social change. The realities were such, Oviglio believed, that many Italians lived outside the legal confines of the 'legitimate' family. A new civil code would have to make provision for alternative family arrangements. He urged the legislature to extend *patria potestas* to fathers of illegitimate children by making them legally responsible for child maintenance and welfare.<sup>127</sup>

A bill presented to the lower house in June 1924, and undersigned by 13 deputies, aimed to make paternity searches legally admissible. The signatories proposed that in cases involving partners cohabitating at the time of conception, and consequently in cases where paternity was not imputable, the laws governing maternity be extended to include provision for paternal reclamation and child support.<sup>128</sup> But the desire to protect the rights of succession for 'legitimate' heirs inspired continued resistance to opening up further debate about the legal and social responsibilities of 'illegitimate' fatherhood. Parliament under fascism never legislated on behalf of paternity though they had both ample opportunity and reason to do so.

The Italian parliament also habitually resisted putting new laws on adoption on the books. Written into the old Napoleonic Code and preserved in the code of 1865, adoption had been an aristocratic invention to insure the inheritance of family patrimony. In the nineteenth century, the new bourgeoisie acquired the titles, names, and land rights of deceased noblemen through adoption. In July 1919, parliament passed a bill outlining special provision for the adoption of war orphans and only those abandoned babies born between 1915 and 1919. The unusual specifications regarding wartime illegitimates seemed to reflect fears that a large percentage of Italian women in occupied territories had been raped and impregnated "with Teutonic blood".<sup>129</sup> This legislation was careful not to equate 'surrogate'

families with 'real' families. The *patria potestas* of an adoptive father had to be established in separate court proceedings and could be revoked far more easily than it could be for 'natural' fathers. Minimum age requirements for an adoptive parent fell from sixty to forty years, but the procedure was complicated and costly. And most significantly, a prospective couple had to be childless to be considered as adoptive parents.<sup>130</sup>

This tentative provision failed to have much of an impact so adoption rates for the orphaned and the abandoned remained very low throughout the following decade.<sup>131</sup> In 1924 the Attorney-General, Silvio Longhi, inaugurated the judicial year of Italy's Supreme Court of Appeal with a speech on the institution of *piccola adozione*. He proposed that major changes be made in family law to accommodate the urgent need to provide abandoned children with families. More than just foster parenthood, his institution of *piccola adozione* granted adoptive families the right of *patria potestas* and gave adopted children the right to a family name. Whether the child should be fully entitled to inheritance on a par with 'natural' heirs was a matter for the courts to decide, he stated. The purpose of the reform, he stressed, was to remedy abandonment by giving legal recognition to types of family formation which fell outside existing laws. He contemplated far-reaching changes in attitudes towards wetnursing families such that they would no longer be seen as "mercenary" in motivation. By promoting the idea that non-biological parents could provide the same love and support as natural parents, he concluded, the state could do much to encourage positive social change.<sup>132</sup>

When the regime finally gave serious consideration to the legal position of 'illegitimates' in Italian society, the reforms which emerged were timid and tardy. With the publication of the first book of Italy's new civil code on 1 July 1939, the right of 'affiliation' was granted. The rulings allowed anyone regardless of sex or civil status who was mentally sound and European in race to affiliate an abandoned child. The affiliating person or parents could adopt as their own as many abandoned children as desired. One restrictive condition comprised the decision to permit affiliation only in cases of childlessness. Another limitation concerned the civil status of this new type of family which remained far inferior to that of 'normal' families. Parental authority was strictly defined so adopted

children did not have the rights of succession or even of support which *patria potestas* bestowed legitimate children.<sup>133</sup> The desire to distinguish this 'surrogate' family from a 'natural' family of blood relations united through marriage went unchanged.

## Endnotes

- 1 *LEX: Legislazione Italiana, Anno IX* (Turin, 1923), pp.480-97.
- 2 ONMI, *I Brefotrofi: Relazione al Primo Congresso Nazionale di Nipiologia del Prof. Guido d'Ormeo* (Rome, 1928), pp. 4-6.
- 3 Documenti ufficiali, "I primi sei mesi di vita dell'ONMI", *MI,II* (December, 1926), p. 58.
- 4 F. Valagussa, *Ciò che L'ONMI ha fatto per la nipiologia, dal Congresso di Ancona (1928) al Congresso di Bolzano (1930)* (Rome, 1930), p.8. This is a slightly longer version of a paper presented at the congress and also published in *Maternità ed Infanzia*, which is cited below.
- 5 *I Brefotrofi: Relazione al Primo Congresso Nazionale di Nipiologia*, p. 7; Valagussa, *Ciò che L'ONMI ha fatto*, p. 8 for the national breakdown of foundling home mortality rates.
- 6 Documenti ufficiali, "I primi sei mesi di vita dell'ONMI", p. 58. And for the results of another ONMI inquest completed in May 1932, see, ispezioni sanitarie ai brefotrofi ed alle sale di recezione del regno, in ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-43, b.1261, f.509817, sf.3, ONMI.
- 7 Regio-Decreto-Legge 8 Maggio 1927, n. 789, Ordinamento del servizio di assistenza dei fanciulli illegittimi o esposti all'abbandono, art. 1.
- 8 Legge 10 Dicembre 1925, n. 2277, Protezione e assistenza della maternità e dell'infanzia, art. 4; and Regio Decreto 15 Aprile 1926, n. 716, Approvazione del regolamento per l'esecuzione della legge 10 dicembre 1925, arts. 122, 129, 136.
- 9 R.D.L. 8 May 1927, arts. 4, 18.
- 10 R.D.L. 8 May 1927, art. 1; Regio-Decreto 29 dicembre 1927, n. 2822, Approvazione del del regolamento per l'esecuzione del R. decreto-legge 8 maggio 1927, art. 25.
- 11 R.D.L. 8 May 1927, art. 4c.
- 12 R.D.L. 8 May 1927, art.3; R.D. 29 December 1927, art. 3.
- 13 R.D.L. 8 May 1927, art. 1; R.D. 29 December 1927, arts. 5, 6.
- 14 R.D.L. 8 May 1927, art. 9; R.D. 29 December 1927, capo IV, Indagini sulla maternità, arts. 21-24. For ONMI's view of maternal reclamation see A. Lo Monaco-Aprile, "Il valore etico dell'assistenza alle madri illegittime", *MI, V* (November, 1930), pp. 1111-8, in which he states: "Welfare is an ideal means of social control and change...our experience is that in the majority of cases the fallen woman who holds her baby to her breast will be redeemed through the power of maternal love and will become an honest woman once more".



- 15 R.D.L. 8 May 1927, art 9; R.D. 29 December 1927, art. 22.
- 16 Documenti ufficiali, "Circolare n. 46", *MI*, V (May, 1930), pp. 427-30. For the foundling home's perspective on maternity searches, A. Montani, *Tre anni di presidenza al Brefotrofio di Roma* (Rome, 1927), p. 17.
- 17 Alberto Blanc's "Circolare n. 46", p. 430; and for Sileno Fabbri's views on collaboration, ACS, SPD, CO, 1932, b. 1261, f. 509817, sf. 3, *Prospettive Assistenziali della Prima Infanzia*, p. 12. The most authoritative contemporary account of the incidence of abortion and infanticide: A. Spallanzani, "I reati di infanticidio e di procurato aborto secondo le statistica guidiziarie Italiane", in CISP, *Proceedings of the International Congress for Studies on Population*, III, pp. 161-80. For a view of how authorities dealt with cases of infanticide, ACM, GP, Q, categoria 5, moralità, b. 224, aborti e infanticidi, 1925-1935, which contains police and prefect reports by year.
- 18 F. Strina, "In tema di assistenza agli illegittimi", *MI*, III (August, 1928), pp. 646-55; G. Mortara, *La salute pubblica in Italia durante e dopo la guerra* (Bari, 1925), p. 450; and, Anon., "I figli di madri nubili", *MI*, II (February, 1927), pp. 29-34.
- 19 L. Baci, *Donna, fecondità, e figli*, p. 318, on contemporary attempts to correlate infant mortality with breast-feeding.
- 20 G. Sanpaolosi, "Osservazioni sui lattanti e sulle madri assistite al Consultorio Pediatrico Maria Callacchioni di Firenze", *MI*, II (April, 1935), pp. 453-67. The most common form of "mixed-method feeding" was the use of cow's milk diluted with rice water and sugar, and cream of wheat for older infants.
- 21 S. Platania, "La mortalità infantile a Catania nel ventennio, 1906-1925", *MI*, IV (September, 1929), pp. 748-61. ONMI did recognise that one of the reasons why working mothers did not breast-feed was the chronic resistance of employers to respect the law on maternity leave, breast-feeding breaks, and factory and office nurseries. Only one of many pieces on this theme in the organisation's journal is "Protezione delle donne e dei fanciulli impiegati nel lavoro", in Documenti ufficiali, *MI*, II (February, 1927), pp. 4-5.
- 22 ISTAT, *Indagine sulla mortalità infantile nel governatorato di Roma* (Rome, 1933), p. 57.
- 23 ISTAT, *Statistica delle cause delle morti per l'anno 1918*: pp. xxxiv, a major cause of death for infants under one was diarrhoea; p. xlvii, mortality differentials by cause for the war years. While just under six percent of legitimate infants died from diarrhoea in 1918, almost nine percent of illegitimate children died from the same cause. A significant but unspecified proportion of these deaths would have resulted from gastro-intestinal tuberculosis, cholera, and viral gastro-enteritis. On p. xlvi is the following table on deaths by civil status:

Deaths per 1,000 live births	In first month of life					From the age of 1 month to 1 year				
	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918
Legitimate	44	45	42	47	53	82	98	120	104	131
Illegitimates	96	93	100	127	147	131	138	170	177	197

For the statistics on the postwar period, see Documenti ufficiali, "La mortalità infantile in Italia", *MI*, XIII (July/October, 1938), p. 314.

- 24 F. Romita, *Evoluzione storica dell'assistenza all'infanzia abbandonata*, p. 86. S. Magni, "I brefotrofi e assistenza alla prima infanzia", *MI*, V (May, 1930), pp. 511-5. Because of bottle-feeding, the dreaded *mughetto* was very common in foundling homes. Oral thrush caused major epidemics. All infectious diseases spread rapidly in homes because babies shared bottles and beds, and were left with unchanged diapers for long periods. And outbreaks of typhoid fever due to ingestion of contaminated milk also caused many deaths in homes.
- 25 See G. G. Alessandri, "Il baliatico mercenario nelle campagne", *MI*, V (November, 1930), pp. 1136-8 on wetnursing in cities and the countryside in 84 provinces distributed throughout the nation.
- 26 F. Valagussa, "La necessaria disciplina alimentare infantile", *MI*, II (November, 1926), pp. 26-9; and in the same issue under Movimento scientifico, "La mortalità nelle prime settimane di vita e i provvedimenti per combatterla", pp. 61-2. See also, F. Coletti, "I figli senza madri", in *Corriere della Sera*, 9 July 1927. In this publicity drive, which included the distribution of mothercraft manuals to girls in secondary schools, 'mothers' milk' was compared to the blood which nourished the fetus during gestation. And mother's milk was held responsible for building up the infant's resistance to infection.
- 27 *I cosiddetti illegittimi: Atti del Convegno Nazionale sui nuovi orientamenti dell'assistenza ai cosiddetti illegittimi*, p. 49; F. Valagussa, "Ciò che L'ONMI ha fatto per la nipiologia", *MI*, V (July, 1930), pp. 688-701; M. Faberi, "L'assistenza pediatrica alla maternità dell'Ospedale di S. Giovanni in Roma", *MI*, VI (April, 1931), pp. 419-36.
- 28 N. Pende, "Salvare i figli del popolo", in *Gazzetta del Popolo*, 9 April 1933; and Movimento scientifico, "Il diritto del bambino al latte materno", *MI*, XIII (July/October, 1938), pp. 392-3.
- 29 ACS, PCM, 1928-1930, f. 1, sf. 6-2, P. 5221, Relazione su alcuni problemi sociali, specialmente dal lato ostetrico, riguardante ONMI, pp. 9-15. An official ONMI inquest, research conducted by Dr. Antonio Bonora in Emilia directly correlated "over-work and under-nourishment of mothers" with high infant mortality. The doctor concluded that levels of prematurity and under-weight of newborns differed by social class. Working-class mothers, and especially those engaged in factory labour, suffered on average an incidence of miscarriage between 30 and 50 percent higher than middle-class women (due mainly, he believed, to industrial accidents and toxic

- poisoning in textile, chemical, and tobacco industries); and weight-at-birth progressively increased the higher up the social ladder the mother was situated. He singled out indigence, and bad conditions at work and home for pregnant and nursing women as other important factors in low survivability of infants. See also the paper on "nati-mortalità" presented by Dr. Cesare Micheli at the 29th National Convention of the Italian Obstetric and Gynaecological Society in 1930: ACS, PNF, SCN, fascicoli personali, "Micheli," b. 19, f. 332.
- 30 N. Castellino, "Le malattie sociali e la natalità", *Popolazione e fascismo*, pp. 129-32.
- 31 Società Italiana di Pediatria, *Atti del XVI Congresso Italiano di Pediatria, 15-18 Settembre 1938* (Varallo Sesia, 1938), pp. 89-92. Valagussa, "Cio che ONMI ha fatto per la nipiologia," pp. 688-701.
- 32 E. Soncino, "Puericoltura pratica a Mantova, 1905-1926", *MI*, II (February, 1927), pp. 74-84.
- 33 Faberi, "L'assistenza pediatrica in Roma", *MI*, (1931), pp. 419-36; and C. Micheli, "La Società Italiana di Ostetricia e Ginecologia e L'ONMI nel campo dell'assistenza materna", *MI*, V (January, 1930), pp. 59-76.
- 34 F. Valagussa, "Relazione al XIV Congresso di Pediatria tenutosi in Firenze nel Settembre 1931", *MI*, VI (October, 1931), pp. 1040-61. The doctor was one of the chief proponents of a "rational rearing of children". Not just concerned with proper physiological development, Valagussa saw nutrition as a factor to improve the biological constituents of racial and individual constitutions. His "biotechnics" shared many of the assumptions of Nicola Pende's "biotypolgy". Food science advocated "biometrical" measurements of infant growth (height, weight, etc.) as a way of gaging the physical adaptation of the organism to systematic and "controlled" development.
- 35 Movimento scientifico, "L'assistenza da punto di vista del bambino collocato in famiglia e in istituti", *MI*, I (November, 1926), pp. 63-4.
- 36 ONMI, *I brefotrofi: Relazione al primo congresso nazionale di nipiologia del Guido D'Ormeo* (Rome, 1928), p. 4; and *I cosiddetti illegittimi*, p. 49 on the 3rd Congress of Nipiology held in Perugia in 1932. Both adressed the problem of "institutionalisation" of infants. The problem of the 'mal-adjustment' of abandoned children is explored in the following section. ACS, SPD, CO, b. 1261, f. 509817, sf. 3, "Prospettive assistenziali della prima infanzia", the address of ONMI's president, Sileno Fabbri, to the 1932 Perugia Congress cited above, pp. 5-7; 8. Fabbri believed that "foundling homes have become an historical anachronism". He stated that "modern and civilised societies" had to insure that their "children grow numerous and sound" for the sake of the "military force and prosperity of the nation".
- 37 G. Maranini, "Gli illegittimi nel progetto del nuovo codice

- civile", *MI*, XIII (May/June, 1938), pp. 188-93.
- 38 G. G. Alessandri, "La delinquenza nei minorenni", *MI*, II (January, 1927), pp. 30-3.
- 39 F. Dalmazzo, "Il problema del traviamiento precoce", *MI*, II (February, 1927), pp. 35-9.
- 40 These ideas were also current in other societies. See the work of the Chicago doctor, William Healy, *The Individual Delinquent: A Text Book of Diagnosis and Prognosis for all Concerned in Understanding Offenders* (Boston, 1915); chapter one on hereditary causes; and pp. 297-315 on the environment. The Ohio-based specialist, Henry Herbert Goddard believed that the majority of criminal children were "feeble-minded". See his *Juvenile Delinquency* (London, 1922), pp. 67-78; 119-20. And the research of the British psychologist, Cyril L. Burt, published in *The Young Delinquent* (Fourth edition, London, 1944), pp. 617-27, emphasised social causes. In contrast, the Italian school of criminology shared many of the assumptions of the Austro-German "constitutional" theorists. See, W. A. Willemse, *Constitution: Types in Delinquency* (London, 1932); chapter one on the delinquent personality. And for an overview of international trends in penology, see the League of Nations report, *Principles Applicable to the Functioning of Juvenile Courts and Similar Bodies, Auxiliary Services and Institutions* (Geneva, 1937), especially pp. 30-4 on imprisonment of minors.
- 41 P. Brusa, "Lo sviluppo dell'attività dell'ONMI nel 1928", *MI*, II (February, 1927), pp. 35-9.
- 42 Many commentators focused on the alleged postwar rise in unmarried cohabitation as a cause of illegitimate childbearing and a symptom of the decline of moral values. F. Loffredo, "Politica della famiglia e della razza", *La Difesa della Razza*, III (20 November 1939), pp. 29-32. See also, *ApS*, Legis. XXVII, Sess. 1924-25, Relazione, 20 May 1925, "Sulla protezione ed assistenza dell'infanzia", on the corruption of minors by the cinema and pornography, which were "schools of perversion and depravity". And see Appendix n. for details of the police clean-up operations carried out in Milan as part of this drive to protect youth from "moral degeneration": ASM, GP, Q, categoria 5, b. 225, associazioni per la moralità.
- 43 B. Di Tullio, *Manuale di Antropologia e psicologia criminale* (Rome, 1931), last chapter on social prevention. And Mussolini too saw the problem of urban growth from the point of view of law and order. See his article, "Sfollare le città," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 22 November 1928. The regime's programme of de-urbanisation and enforced re-patriation to villages was tied to the anti-crime campaign, and especially affected vagabonds, alcoholics, and other undesirable delinquents.
- 44 Professor of Psychology at the Royal University of Rome, De Sanctis had taken part in the 1905 5th International Congress of Psychology which addressed the problem of criminal psychology. Although representatives at the convention all believed that "anti-social behaviour in youths" resulted from character malformation, they

could not come to any agreement over the relative importance of biological and social factors. They did believe nonetheless that the child first showed "criminal tendencies" in early adolescence due to a "perversion and degeneration of sexual maturation." Some children channeled their sexual impulses in aggressive and criminal ways. See *Atti del V Congresso Internazionale di Psicologia tenuto in Roma dal 26 al 30 Aprile 1905* (Rome, 1905), pp. 593-58; 667-73. Along with Enrico Morselli and Leonardo Bianchi, De Sanctis had been a member of the parliamentary commission assigned with the task of formulating a new classification of mental illnesses for the 1907 census. According to their views, delinquents could fall either into the category of "idiots, imbeciles, and cretins" with a morbid predisposition to crime or into the category of "physical degenerates, the morally mad, and psychopaths." See, ISTAT, *Le malattie mentali in Italia: Relazione statistico-sanitaria sugli alienati presenti nei luoghi di cura al 1 gennaio 1926* (Rome, 1928), pp. 12-7.

- 45 S. De Sanctis, "Su alcuni tipi di mentalità inferiore", *Archivio di psichiatria e scienze penali*, XXVII (1906), pp. 193-6, in which he defines the juvenile criminal type as an "epileptoid mentality". And in his *Educazione dei deficienti* (Milan, 1915), pp. 200-17, De Sanctis develops the concept of moral madness as an attribute of degenerate children. Others also invested children with evil powers: P. Petrazzani, *Le degenerazioni umani* (Milan, 1912); G. Montesano, *Assistenza dei deficienti anormali e minorenni delinquenti* (Milan, 1913). De Sanctis believed that society had a right to defend itself from "the psychologically-abnormal child, of whom a significant majority become juvenile delinquents and habitual criminals." See his intervention in the debate, *ApS*, *Relazione*, Tornata 20 May 1925, and "Il fattore morale nell'assistenza dell'infanzia", *MI*, I (December, 1926), pp. 19-24.
- 46 *ApS*, *Relazione*, Tornata 20 May 1925; and Min. GG, *Lavori preparativi del codice penale e del codice di procedura penale*, V (Rome, 1929), p. 8 in which Rocco states that his main objective in penal reform has been to "organise more efficient means of social defense, both repressive and preventive, against the ever more aggressive offense of delinquency." On Rocco, see N. Mezzetti, *Alfredo Rocco nella dottrina e nel diritto della rivoluzione fascista* (Rome, 1930).
- 47 Min. GG, *Codice Penale* (Rome, 1930), p. 7.
- 48 Enrico Ferri had included an ample section on social dangerousness in his 1921 draft of the first book of the penal code, though Rocco broadens the meaning further. See F. Larclier, *L'Avant-projet de code-penal italien de 1921* (Brussels, 1925). D. Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848-1918* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 140-7. For a general overview of Italian criminal theory, see E. D. Monachesi, "Trends in Criminological Research," *American Sociological Review*, I (June, 1936), pp. 396-406, which, however, fails to draw out distinctions between the constitutional types described by the bio-typologists like Pende and the personality types described by psychologists like De Sanctis and others.

- 49 Min. GG, *Codice Penale*, p. 6.; and Min. GG, *Lavori preparativi*, pp. 8; 253-5. G. Santaniello, *Manuale di diritto penale* (Milan, 1967), pp.130-3.
- 50 A. Crespi and F. Stella, *Commentario breve al codice penale* (Padua, 1986), pp. 389-90.
- 51 A. Rocco, *Preliminary Scheme of the Italian Penal Code* (Rome, 1929), p. 66; and *The Italian Penal Code*, introduction by E. M. Wise, (London, 1978), p. xxxviii.
- 52 C. Bovio, "La classificazione del delinquente nel nuovo codice penale", *Rivista penale*, III (January/June, 1932), pp. 23-7. *The Italian Penal Code*, pp. 36-7.
- 53 *The Italian Penal Code*, p. 38; and Rocco's explanation in *Codice Penale*, p. 38.
- 54 L. Lattes, "A proposito del delinquente per tendenza", *Aac*, L (November/December, 1930), pp. 927-30; and the equally critical view of G. Del Vecchio, *Il soggetto attivo del reato nel diritto positivo vigente e nel progetto Rocco* (Milan, 1930), pp. 80-95 which points out that the courts can not comply with positivist measures without committing gross injustices.
- 55 For Rocco's response, see his commentary in *Codice Penale*, p. 29 where he explains his concept of "*malvaggia*".
- 56 *The Italian Penal Code*, p. xxxviii; *Codice Penale*, p. 28.
- 57 *Lex: Provvedimenti legislativi* (Turin, 1934), pp. 2161-72; and U. Conti, "Tribunali per fanciulli", *Rivista penale*, I (July/December, 1930), pp. 1213-32.
- 58 G. A. Blanc, "Relazione sullo sviluppo dell'attività dell'ONMI, 1926-1930", *MI*, VI (November, 1931), p. 1132.
- 59 P. Brusa, "Lo sviluppo dell'attività dell'ONMI, 1926-1930", *MI*, IV (May, 1929), pp. 491-530; and Blanc, "Relazione", pp. 1130-46.
- 60 V. Cao, "Valutazione del 'livello-mentale' dei bimbi e giovanetti: Applicazione del testo di Ballard", *Aac*, LX (1940), pp. 24-67; and in the same volume, A. Franchini, "Età cronologica e trattamento giuridico del delinquente", pp. 827-35.
- 61 Documenti ufficiali, "I centri di osservazioni per minorenni nelle direttive dell'ONMI", *MI*, X (May, 1935), p. 18.
- 62 Documenti ufficiali, "Contributi dell'ONMI all'antropologia e psicologia criminale", *MI*, X (June, 1935), pp. 1-7.
- 63 A. Lo Monaco-Aprile, *La politica assistenziale dell'Italia fascista* (Rome, 1931), pp. 123-5; the author points out that under-age prostitutes and female run-aways received different treatment from the police than male delinquents. The police would bring no charges against young girls; rather ONMI, private charities, and Catholic

youth associations would be called in to provide temporary shelter with the aim of "salvation and moral re-education." A file in ASA, P, 1929-1931, relazioni periodiche sulla situazione politiche, a prefect report of 30 December 1929, addressed to the president of Pavia's ONMI federation. This document shows just how blurred was the distinction between "social dangerousness" and "political dangerousness". The police had arrested and detained as a "subversive" a homeless vagrant", the prefect relates, because he might become a "political delinquent" in the future. He had shown himself "capable of crime and political disobedience" because of his "lazy and odious character".

- 64 Blanc, "Relazione," pp. 1143-6. The ONMI file in ASM, GP, cat.12, b.378, minorenni fermati per misure di P.S. od abbandonati, 1927-1932, contains documents from Milan's chief of police which show how the operations were organised. With the help of the prefect, the police picked up minors and detained them. The point of detention was to "protect" the youths from harmful influences. This campaign could not have succeeded without charitable support. In this case, a national charity, the Casare Beccaria, and a local association, the Opera Cardinal Ferrari, which both maintained houses of correction, co-operated generously. The Cesare Beccaria foundation opened a new institution specifically for detained youths; and the Ferrari institute lent space within its own buildings, and covered the cost of maintenance for the detention project. See especially letters dated 6 May 1927 and 22 March 1927. What is most disturbing about the search operations was the power to detain juveniles who had not actually committed any crimes. The fact that abandoned and homeless children received no different treatment than juveniles at least suspected of wrong-doing demonstrates the indiscriminate nature of detention. ACS, PCM, 1926-1930, f. 1, sf. 1.6, P. 2023, Milano-Opera Cardinal Ferrari, nuovo palazzo per rieducazione delle anime travagliate, 14 August 1926.
- 65 Min. GG, *Statistica giudiziaria penale per l'anno 1934* (Rome, 1938). The table on pp. xviii-xix gives annual break-downs by the type of the crime for the period 1926-1938. Although predominating annually over any other crime in the period from 1926 to 1931, public order and decency offences dramatically increased beginning in 1932. While 12,787 people were charged with "mendicity" in 1932, 29,809 were charged in 1937.
- 66 S. Fabbri, "I capisaldi del programma del regio commissario del ONMI", *MI*, VII (March, 1932), p. 203.
- 67 ASCP, CS, no. 56, categoria 5, 1935-1940, lavoro delle donne e dei minorenni, letter of 21 May 1935 from the inspector of corporations to the mayor of Pavia about chronic unemployment; letter 31 May 1935 from the PNF secretary to the mayor of Pavia outlining the system which came into effect in February 1924 with the endorsement of the Ministry of the National Economy.
- 68 S. Fabbri, "I capisaldi", p. 203. Appointed president of ONMI in 1932, the former president of Milan's provincial federation realised that abandonment of legitimate babies was also a big

- problem. He estimated that on average just over 10,000 infants per year were unlawfully registered as illegitimate and dumped onto private charities. This drain on limited resources, he felt, made finding recovery for those with a legal claim to assistance more difficult. See his *ONMI* (Rome, 1933), p. 38.
- 69 Catholic newspapers gave much supportive coverage to the regime's drive to combat parental abandonment of adolescents. See "Dall'Interno", *MI* VII (February, 1932), pp. 144-5, which gives details of 2 such cases. Rocco's code increased the length of sentences and also the amount of fines admissible by law. In the above 2 cases the pecuniary penalties, amounting to over 10,000 *lire*, were far more harsh than the additional sentences of imprisonment for under a year, far less than the minimum set by the code. See details of the case of one woman who was convicted to 8 month's imprisonment for abandoning her illegitimate but reclaimed child aged 12 with the wetnurse who had reared him in infancy. In her defense, the woman had argued she had to leave Messina to find work. "Abbandono di persone minori", in *Rivista Penale*, IV (July/August, 1933), p. 956.
- 70 Blanc, "Relazione", p. 1141.
- 71 ISTAT, *Le malattie mentali in Italia*, pp. 17; 101. A. Carelli, "Sei anni di attività dell'opera nazionale maternità e infanzia", *MI*, VII (October, 1932), pp. 972-91. F. Valagussa, "Relazione al XIV Congresso di pediatria", p. 1045. ISTAT, *Statistica degli istituti di prevenzione e di pena, 1938-1948* (Rome, 1954), p. 11.
- 72 "Statistica delle carceri", *Rivista Penale*, LXV (1907), pp. 247-9 gives the 1902 figure of imprisoned minors at 8,827; G. Spano, *Notizie sui riformatori e sulle sezioni per minorenni nelle carceri giudiziarie* (Rome, 1923), p. 219 for the 1922 figure; ISTAT, *Statistica degli istituti di prevenzione e di pena, 1938-1948*, p. 60 for the 1938 breakdown by sex and age.
- 73 ISTAT, *Le malattie mentali in Italia*, p. 19, which like the first such survey of the nation's alienated population, that of 1907, admits to grossly under-estimating the actual number; Blanc, "Relazione," pp. 1132-1134; 1151.
- 74 ACS, SPD-CO, 610, D. di Robilant, *L'assistenza obbligatoria agli illegittimi riconosciuti: Note ed appunti di assistenza sociale* (Turin, 1937), pp. 1-3.
- 75 ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1943, b. 1261, f. 509816, Pro Memoria per il Duce, 8 Settember 1932. The Countess di Robilant was the president of the International Committee for the Protection of Infancy and president of the National Council of Italian Women.
- 76 *L'assistenza obbligatoria*, pp. 6; 43; 68.
- 77 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 78 *Ibid.*, pp. 10-22. ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1943, b. 1261, f. 509817, sf. 3, Relazione 1927-1936 e dati, from the Countess to Mussolini.



- 79 SPD, CO, b. 1261, f. 509817, sf. 3, Relazione 1927-1936 e Dati, pp. 2-3.
- 80 ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1943, b. 1261, f. 509817, sf. 3, correspondence from Regina Terruzzi, letter of 4 April 1934, and undated response from the Gabinetto of the Ministry of Justice which gives details of amendments; and in sf. 1, compagna per i figli illegittimi, letter campaign to Donna Rachele, 30 October 1937.
- 81 ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1943, b. 1261, f. 509817, sf. 3, correpondence of R. Commissario Blanc to Mussolini, letter of 15 March 1928; and comments written by Mussolini; and Sileno Fabbri's Prospettive Assistenziali della Prima Infanzia in the same holding, pp. 29-30 on paternal reclamation and adoption.
- 82 *L'assistenza obbligatoria*, pp. 1-3; the Countess and other ONMI officials confronted an angry protest over the 1927 law mounted by Catholic women's organisations. Beginning in 1928 the lay journal, *Il Solco Fascista*, began a series of articles criticising the regime for privileging unwed mothers at the expense of "decent" women. See, A. Lo Monaco-Aprile, "Il valore etico dell'assistenza alle madri illegittime", *MI*, V (November, 1930), pp.1111-8, for details of this controversy. And, see Pope Pius XI's Papal Encyclical, On the Reconstruction of the Social Order, delivered on 15 May 1931, in which he posits his strong opposition to the illegitimacy campaign: "We are sorry to note that not infrequently nowadays it happens that through a certain inversion of the true order of things, ready and bountiful assistance is provided for the unmarried mother and her illegitimate offspring (who, of course, must be helped in order to avoid a greater evil) which is denied to legitimate mothers or given sparingly or almost begrudgingly". He calls for public provision to uphold the "moral order", based on matrimony and the family. *The Papal Encyclicals: 1903-1939*, C. Carlen Ihm, ed., (Raleigh, N. Carolina, 1981), pp. 223; 411-2.
- 83 *L'assistenza obbligatoria*, p.7.
- 84 ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1943, b. 1261, f. 597817, sf. 3, Pro Memoria, 8 September 1932; the Countess' letter to Mussolini dated 17 November 1933.
- 85 ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1943, b. 1261, f. 509817, sf. 3, Relazione 1927-1936 e Dati, pp. 1-3; *L'assistenza obbligatoria*, pp. 5-6.
- 86 *L'assistenza obbligatoria*, pp. 9; 11-12.
- 87 ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1943, b. 1261, f. 509817, sf. 3, undated Appunti per il Duce written by his secretary, Sebastiani (probably written in 1932 when the Countess began a letter and telephone campaign supplicating the Duce for support); and Daisy's letter to Mussolini, 12 July 1937.
- 88 *L'assistenza obbligatoria*, p. 18.
- 89 *Ibid.*, pp. 10-1; 17; 20; 23-33; 41; 70.

- 90 Ibid., pp. 37; 63.
- 91 ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1943, b. 1261, f. 509817, sf. 3, letter from Daisy to Mussolini, 17 November 1933.
- 92 ACR, ASS, ONMI-Federazione e Comitato di Patronato di Roma, Ispettorato dell'ONMI, f. 7113, sf. 1, inspector's report dated 23 April 1942, which gives details about how the refectory functioned.
- 93 ACR, ASS, ONMI-Federazione e Comitato di Patronato di Roma, Ispettorato dell'ONMI, f. 755, sf. 1, Assistenza Materna, letter of 27 May 1936.
- 94 *L'assistenza obbligatoria*, pp. 40; 51. ACR, ASS, ONMI-Federazione e Comitato di Patronato di Roma, Ispettorato dell'ONMI, f. 755, sf. 1, Relazione of 17 May 1932, Refettorio gestito dall'Assistenza Materna-Via Bixio.
- 95 ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1943, b. 346, f. 120, sf. 135, Roma-Assistenza Materna, letter of 20 July 1931 from Mussolini's secretary; letter of 29 October 1931 to the Duce; and *Regolamento della Casa Assistenza Materna* (Rome, 1930), pp. 2-7.
- 96 ACR, ASS, ONMI-Federazione e Comitato di Patronato di Roma, Ispettorato dell'ONMI, f. 755, sf. 1, Assistenza Materna, letters of 27 May 1936 and 27 April 1937 giving details of this practice which began in 1922 when the refectory first opened.
- 97 *L'assistenza obbligatoria*, pp. 56; 81-100.
- 98 Ibid., pp. 105. ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1943, b. 1261, f. 509817, sf. 3, Relazione 1927-1936 e Dati, preface, and p. 2.
- 99 Ibid., case histories pp. 48-50; 51.
- 100 Ibid., pp. 15-6; 24-6; 62.
- 101 ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1943, b. 1261, f. 509817, sf. 3, undated Appunti per il Duce; Relazione 1927-1936 e Dati, preface.
- 102 ISTAT, *Statistica delle cause di morte nell'anno 1937* (Rome, 1937), p. 43 for table on maternal mortality by cause from 1900 to 1937; p. 46 graphs by age; p. 47 death by civil status. Compare this to the figures found in ISTAT, *Statistica delle cause di morte per l'anno 1918* (Rome, 1924), pp. xxxi.
- 103 *L'assistenza obbligatoria*, pp.38-39; 51.
- 104 ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1943, b. 1261, f. 509817, sf. 3, letter of 17 November 1933.
- 105 *L'assistenza obbligatoria*, pp. 105
- 106 Ibid., pp. 17-23.

- 107 ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1943, b. 1261, f. 509817, sf. 3, undated record of a telephone conversation between a local patronessa of ONMI and a member of the provincial federation; and documents concerning complaints about services and an official inquest ordered by Mussolini, testimony of Contessa Codurri Borromeo to Mussolini, 8 November 1933. IPAll, Provincia di Roma, riservati personali, file named Comune di Poli, letter dated 13 November 1933 from president of ONMI's provincial federation to president of comitato di patronato of Poli, about protests over late payment of subsidies.
- 108 *L'assistenza obbligatoria*, p. 71; 80-2.
- 109 A. Montani, *Tre anni di presidenza al Brefotrofio di Roma*, pp. 24-7.
- 110 ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1943, b. 1261, f. 509817, sf. 1, realizzazioni del fascismo, regolamento del l'Asilo Materno dell'ONMI in Monterotundo.
- 111 ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1943, b. 218, f. e, pse 487, Istituto Materno Regina Elena, letter dated 28 April 1930 from ONMI's sub-commissioner, Carlo Scotti, to the Duce.
- 112 *L'assistenza obbligatoria*, pp. 40-3; 62; 68; 71-2; 76.
- 113 Ibid., pp. 13; 54; 76; 79; 81; 91; 98; 101.
- 114 Ibid., p. 96.
- 115 Ibid. p. 104.
- 116 ACS, PCM, 1934-1936, f. 1.6, sf. 2, P. 7258, Roma-Assistenza Materna, letter of 25 July 1936 to Marchese Medici del Vascello, Under-Secretary to the Presidency; letter of 30 August 1936 from Mussolini's secretary.
- 117 ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1945, b. 1261, f. 509817, sf. 3, Sileno Fabbri's 1932 report, Prospettive assistenziali della prima infanzia, pp. 14-5.
- 118 ONMI, *ONMI dalla sua fondazione*, pp.86-8, 90. C. Bergamaschi, *L'ONMI-motivi e proposte di riforma* (Rome, 1937), pp. 19-21. S. Fabbri, *Direttive e chiarimenti intorno allo spirito informatore della legislazione riguardante L'ONMI e alle sua pratiche applicazioni* (Rome, 1934), pp. 24-44.
- 119 ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1943, b. 1261, f. 509817, sf. 3, letter from Blanc to Mussolini, 15 March 1928; *L'ONMI dalla sua fondazione*, p. 87; G. A. Blanc, "Relazione sullo sviluppo dell'attività dell'ONMI, 1926-1930", *MI*, VI (November, 1931), pp. 1080-146.
- 120 *ApC*, Legis. XXVIII, Sess. 1929-31, Discussioni, 9 Aprile 1931, Stato di previsione della spese del Ministero per l'esercizio finanziario dal 1 luglio 1931 al 30 giugno 1932. Documenti ufficiali, "La discussione sul bilancio", *MI*, VI (February, 1931) pp. 143-5; Documenti ufficiali, "L'ONMI nella discussione alla

- Camera", *MI*, VII (April, 1932), pp. 459-62.
- 121 "Il convegno nazionale dei delegati provinciali dell'ONMI", *MI*, VII (July, 1932), pp. 631-40
- 122 *ONMI dalla sua fondazione*, p. 88.
- 123 *Ibid.*, p. 88 for graph of expenditure.
- 124 ACS, Fondo SPD-CO, S. Fabbri, *L'attività della federazione provinciale Milanese dell'ONMI durante il 1928*, pp. 35-40. ACS, PCM, 1928-1930, f. 1, sf. 6.2, P. 6968, Milano-federazione provinciale dell'ONMI, Relazione di Bianca Fabbri, March 1931, p. 13. ACM, GP, b. 378, ONMI, letters of 17 November 1931 and 24 August 1932.
- 125 ACS, PCM, 1928-1930, f. 1, sf. 6.2, P. 6134, Mantova-federazione provinciale dell'ONMI, raccolta della più importanti circolari emanate dalla federazione, sent by president F. Maccabruni to Mussolini in 1930; and atti della federazione e relazione sull'attività.
- 126 ACS, Min. Interno, GB, b. 1, f. 97, Situazione illegittimi (1940-41), the inquest results.
- 127 Camera dei Deputati, *La legislazione fascista, 1922-1943*, I (Rome, 1929), pp. 295-7. M. Bellomo, *La condizione giuridica della donna in Italia: Vicende antiche e moderne* (Turin, 1970), pp. 119-20.
- 128 *La legislazione fascista*, p. 332. C. Predella, "La piccola adozione", *Rivista Penale*, LXI (January/May, 1935), pp. 349-55.
- 129 G. Sabatini, "Stato di necessita e dolo in tema di aborto procurato", *Rivista Penale*, LXI (January/May, 1935), pp. 308-22. *La legislazione fascista*, p. 327.
- 130 *I cosiddetti illegittimi*, pp. 200-8.
- 131 ISTAT, *Statistica giudiziaria civile e commerciale per gli anni 1936-1937* (Rome, 1939), p. xxiii; *Statistica giudiziaria civile e commerciale per l'anno 1938* (Rome, 1940), pp. xviii; xix.
- 132 S. Longhi, "Discorso del Procuratore Generale per l'inaugurazione dell'anno giudiziario della cassazione", *Rivista Penale* III (January/June, 1930), pp. 1-21.
- 133 G. Maranini, "Gli illegittimi nel progetto del nuovo codice civile", pp. 188-93. *ONMI dalla sua fondazione*, pp. 9399.



## EPILOGUE

In 1937, ONMI's leadership published results which showed that the organisation had not achieved its aims. Not only had the birth and marriage rates continued to fall, but infant mortality had begun to rise again. In 1937, the national average of 10.87 deaths for every 100 infants under the age of one was higher than it had been in 1930. Between 1924 and 1937, infant mortality had increased by 5 percent in the Abruzzi and Molise, by 6 percent in Latium, by 14 percent in Calabria, by 16 percent in Sardinia, and by 18 percent in Sicily. The decreases in levels of infant mortality realised in Tuscany, Emilia, and Umbria were much lower than had been expected back in 1927.<sup>1</sup>

The national institution also admitted that social programmes had failed to put a halt to illegitimacy. The proportion of illegitimates to every 100 livebirths had risen from 4.9 in 1924 to 5.3 in 1932 and then slowly returned to the 1924 level by 1937. But the numbers of babies who were being reclaimed had declined from 78.4 percent of illegitimate newborns in 1924 to 77.2 percent in 1937. And authorities estimated that the abortion rate had in the very least trebled between 1927 to 1937. About fifteen percent of pregnancies, they calculated, ended in abortion.<sup>2</sup>

In response to these disappointing results, the fascist government made a formal declaration to its people that the "fecund decade" had come to an unsuccessful end. In 1937, a number of articles appeared in the national press which announced that the regime was preparing to revise population policy in its entirety. On 17 February 1937, a press release from the Grand Council was published in *Il Popolo d'Italia*. This stated that the birthrate had continued to decline in cities and in the countryside notwithstanding concerted attempts to promote fertility. The annual number of births decreased too by a wider margin each year. Ministers revealed that they intended to implement a new "plan of action" as the course of fascism's *politica demografica assistenziale* entered its "second phase". The "social revolution" would continue, but the means would have to change since "positive eugenic encouragements" had not altered the procreative habits of Italian people.<sup>3</sup>

On 3 March 1937, the Grand Council met to discuss the future of population policy. Giuseppe Bottai gave a speech which addressed the

question of the underlying causes of the failure of the demographic campaign. Economic privations explained why Italians refused to have more children, Bottai argued. He encouraged those assembled to admit that "babies cost money". The "low quality of life in Italy, the slow progress towards social development, and considerable poverty and unemployment" exerted a "constant anti-demographic pressure" on the people which welfare had been unable to dispel. He continued:

"The demographic programme has failed completely. And it has failed because of fascism's idealism. The regime has neglected to take into consideration the fact that when misery and destitution knock at your door, you have no patience for big words and grand appeals to collective solidarity. You become egotistical. The idea of the defense of the race has not sunk into the heads of most Italians. The need to continue to produce in order to preserve the race for future generations is meaningless to those who face a far more personal and daily struggle to ensure the survival of themselves and their families".

The regime, he stated, should continue to provide social assistance, but aid should be confined to only the most prolific members of society. Italians, Bottai believed, were guilty of "conscious and premeditated sterility". When a "tree does not bear fruit", he stated, "you must cut it down". The regime, he urged, should "root up the infecund weeds and let the fertile plants ones grow".<sup>4</sup>

Bottai proposed a number of remedies for Mussolini to consider, which together comprised a mixed programme of positive and negative measures. He wanted the regime to "abolish all residual indulgence" towards single citizens over 30 years of age, childless couples, and couples with fewer than four children. His plan called for new legislation to prohibit the employment of these categories in all private and public enterprises. Prolific people should be given enough material rewards to make them into a new economic élite, he stated. Already extended to all workers, family allowances, he believed, should be raised from 4 *lire* for every child to an amount which truly reflected the real cost of childcare and would provide a substantial income support to big families. The state should also consider implementing an annual income tax against "sterile and infecund unions". Couples should be forced to pay the state what they saved in household expenses by not having any or many children. This penalty could amount to as much as two thirds the property and income of a couple who produced only one child. And even those who had two and three children would be forced to pay a sizable proportion of their

yearly earnings to the state. In addition to these measures, he recommended, a law prohibiting childless people from drawing up wills and unmarried people from inheriting wealth was another avenue the regime should explore. He stated: "we should take away the automobiles too and any other assets which those citizens who practice voluntary sterility possess".<sup>5</sup>

Alberto De Stefani began his address to the Grand Council by stating that "reproduction is a political duty which many Italians have failed to perform". Like Bottai, he believed the state should stop being so tolerant towards those who refused to be fecund. Welfare, he stated, had caused Italians to become selfish and dependent rather than responsible citizens. He pointed out that despite progressively harsher penalties against celibacy, which had trebled the amount of the annual tax between 1927 to 1936, many single men still preferred to pay the price of bachelorhood rather than embark on marriage and fatherhood. If celibacy really was a "crime against the state and against the race", as official ideology upheld, then the regime should increase the severity of the punishments against infecundity. He considered the idea of expanding the powers of the state over the private lives of citizens. A feasible course of action for a new demographic campaign, De Stefani suggested, would involve enacting legislation to criminalise celibacy and to force people to marry before their thirtieth birthday. Another possibility was to give the courts the authority to annul marriages which remained childless after five years.<sup>6</sup>

When news of these deliberations leaked out to the press, national party headquarters were inundated with calls from citizens who feared imminent state expropriations. Telephone tapings also revealed that some Italians were trying desperately to offload assets by signing over property to particularly prolific relatives. Foreign newspapers picked up on the fact that these proposed measures coincided with the Grand Council's resolution at the same meeting to launch a fifteen-year rearmament programme based on Hitler's plans for a permanent war economy. The militant and punitive drift in pronatalist policy, German journalists reported, reflected worry about how fascism was going to pay the costs of armaments and autarky without levying hefty taxes.<sup>7</sup>

Lawmakers received plans for the implementation of a fascist version of Roman sanctions against celibacy with considerable



misgivings. At least one prominent senator, Alfredo Felici, voiced concern that the regime was moving far too quickly in its efforts to salvage the demographic campaign. Before putting new provisions on the books, those drawing up fascism's revised civil code, he stated, would have to consider the legal questions raised by radical proposals such as the abrogation of infertile marriages. Legislators would also need time to discuss the juridical framework of harsh new penalties before contemplating passing laws on inheritance taxes and rights.<sup>6</sup>

The regime did seem to be groping for some new vision for the future. The March deliberations displayed a cabinet which had lost all sense of political purpose. When confronted with the defeat of fascism's greatest battle, ministers frantically clung to their delusions that an extension of the system of privileges and reprisals already enacted would increase the birthrate. To hide the serious crisis of credibility which the government faced, one hasty bit of legislation followed another in quick succession. On 3 June 1937, the regime promulgated a law which created the *Unione Fascista fra le Famiglie Numerose* as part of the plan to restrict social welfare benefits to the most deserving. The association was designed to be a huge interest group within Italian society which would take over many of the party's responsibilities for mass demonstrations and celebrations around demographic themes. With the establishment of provincial federations, the organisation would serve to put moral and economic pressure on Italians to reproduce by showing them just how much fascism privileged prolific people. And on the 17 June, a new enactment broadened the range of family allowances.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most far-reaching move by the regime involved the creation of an *Ufficio Centrale Demografico* under the Interior Ministry on 7 June 1937. According to its founding statutes, the competence of the department was to review laws on citizenship and rights and to promote the development of "demographic and racist" legislation. Top on the agenda stood plans for an extension of laws to prevent the "bastardisation of the Italian race", such as the enactment on 19 April 1937 against "conjugal relations" between Africans and Italians in the colonies.<sup>8</sup> Those who defended these measures from criticism stated that the regime was fulfilling its mission and following its doctrine. Ferdinando Loffredo argued: "If you implement a positive policy to promote the health and

fertility of the race, it's only logical that you should also try to preserve the race by other means. Fascism has not deviated from its original plan for racial defense but has merely developed the racist programme in the direction towards which it was destined to proceed".<sup>11</sup>

Mussolini also attempted to silence attacks against the new militancy. On 30 July 1937, the Duce answered those critics who charged that the regime was trying to implant German racism on Italian soil. At an address to party secretaries in Forlì, he stated: "To say that fascism has imitated anyone or anything is absolutely absurd". In September, he spoke at a rally in Trieste where he argued:

"The racial problem [of crossbreeding] has not suddenly emerged as some seem to believe. It's been on the horizon ever since the foundation of empire; because history has taught that empires are made with arms but maintained when those who have conquered have a strong racial consciousness not only of their difference but also of their overwhelming superiority over the vanquished".<sup>12</sup>

If 1937 marked the beginning of a new phase in fascist population policy, then 1938 brought a definitive end to the preeminent place welfare held in the regime's programme for racial defense.

On 26 July 1938, Achille Starace received a delegation of university professors which included Nicola Pende, Franco Savorgnan, and other prominent eugenicists within the *Gruppo Universitario Fascista*. The academics came armed with a Race Manifesto which they wanted the government to accept as the doctrinal basis for all future racist legislation. They proclaimed that there existed "a pure Italian race" whose "purity of blood" was the biological foundation for the nobility of Mediterranean civilisation. Italian racism, they continued, differed from German racism which was based on the mistaken belief that all Europeans were of a similar constitutional type. Careful to point out other distinguishing characteristics of Italian racism, they hastened to add that they sought to conserve the "uniqueness" of Italian attributes rather than affirm the "superiority" of their race. Mediterraneans, they argued, were physically and psychologically different from all other European races. The professors also put on the political agenda acceptance of their theories of the Jewish contagion. While other migrant races who had settled in Italy over the centuries had become fused into the Italian stirp, they maintained, Jews were the only race which had refused to assimilate. "Jews do not belong to the Italian race", they believed. Achille Starace agreed with their views and stated that "the spread of world semitism" made

Jews an enemy of fascism. The ultimate logic of fascism, he affirmed, was the preservation of the "biological purity, the morality, and the genius of the Italian race".<sup>13</sup>

In 1938, the regime accelerated moves which made the dictatorship into what government spokesmen now called a "*stato razzista*". On 7 September 1938, the regime revoked the citizenship rights of recent immigrants whose parents belonged to the "Jewish race". This enactment marked a turning-point in Italian law as a definition of biological race now became a legal category. That same month, the *Ufficio Centrale Demografico* was transformed into the Superior Council of Race and Demography, a full branch of civil administration on a par with the Health or Education Ministries. On the 5 of the month, the regime also passed legislation which tendered ONMI's official resignation as the demographic campaign's showpiece institution.<sup>14</sup>

Approved by a new law on 22 May 1939, the royal decree law of September 1938 tightened the grip the Interior Ministry had over ONMI by abolishing much of its former autonomy as a parastate organisation. Mussolini himself became the titular head of the institution. New rulings also made representation by delegates from the Race and Demography Council and the Fascist Association of Numerous Families mandatory within the leadership of all three tiers of administration. Much of ONMI's huge programme was dismantled and many of its duties dispersed to various government departments. Supervision over the development of assistance towards delinquent and deficient children passed entirely to the Ministries of Education and Justice, and provision for healthy children over six years of age disappeared as a planning target. The main work left to the new ONMI pertained to the care of needy infants, but even here the objectives were pared down to more realistic proportions.<sup>15</sup> Talk of welfare revolution lingered, but the aims and language of population policy had changed.

Fascism never completed the 'civilising mission' outlined in the Ascension Day Speech. In those last three years before Italy's entry into the Second World War on the side of the Axis powers, the regime embarked frantically on a downward spiral. The momentum of reform had been irretrievably lost and all the old promises had worn thin. The desperate search for someone to blame for the regime's own failures continued apace as the Jew replaced the celibate as the nation's chief internal enemy. The formal Declaration of Race on 6 October 1938, the

creation of a Race Tribunal on 13 July 1939, and legislation that year to prevent the birth of "hybrids" and to halt the spread of Jewish menace all revealed what the regime had been all along. Mussolini presided over an unsteady and changeable dictatorship which abandoned old causes and launched new battles for want of any clear plans for the future of the nation.<sup>16</sup>

The National Organisation for the Protection of Motherhood and Infancy barely survived the war but did outlive the regime. By 1945 allied bombings had destroyed 3,266 of the 9,959 institutions under ONMI control in 1940. In March 1946, new ONMI leaders began to reconstruct federations and recommence the work which fascism had begun in the interwar years. Recognising finally that the organisation's structure and programme were far too unwieldy, the Italian parliament voted to abolish ONMI in December 1966.<sup>17</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 C. Bergamaschi, *L'ONMI*, pp. 20-1.
- 2 Movimento demografico, "Le nascite illegittime in Italia", *MI*, XIII (July/October, 1938), pp. 314-5.
- 3 ACS, SPD, CR, 1922-1943, b. 32, f. problemi demografici, sf. 15, Gran Consiglio, March 1937, relazione sui provvedimenti draconiali e sensazionali.
- 4 Ibid., relazione Bottai sul problema demografico, 3 March 1937; see also "Le deliberazioni dell'Alto Concesso", *La Tribuna*, 5 March 1937.
- 5 Ibid., relazione Bottai.
- 6 Ibid., relazione De Stefani sul'obbligo del matrimonio e della filiazione, 2 March 1937.
- 7 Ibid., inserto A, March 1937.
- 8 Ibid., Alfredo Felici, Senato del Regno, breve considerazioni su di un articolo di S. E. Bottai.
- 9 ACS, SPD, CO, 1922-1943, ONMI, b. 1261, f. 509817, sf. 1, Unione Fascista fra le Famiglie Numerose, 1937.
- 10 See the heading in the inventory at the Archivio Centrale dello Stato, under the Ministry of Interior's holdings; the archives of this department remain "fuori consultazione".
- 11 F. E. Loffredo, "Problemi demografici", *Difesa Sociale*, XVI (January/February, 1938), pp. 191-5.
- 12 Anon., "Il Partito e il razzismo Italiano", *La Difesa della Razza*, I, 5 August 1938, p. 2.
- 13 For a full text of the manifesto, see C. Bergamaschi, "La difesa della razza e L'ONMI", *MI*, XIII (July/October, 1938), pp. 243-51.
- 14 For the 1938 anti-semitic legislation, see *LEX: Provvedimenti legislativi*, XLVII (Turin, 1938), pp. 1658-9; 1665; 2097-9.
- 15 R. D. L. 5 Settembre 1938, n. 2008, nuove disposizioni sull'ordinamento dell'ONMI; published in *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 14 January 1939; and the Law of 22 May 1939, n. 961 in Ibid., 13 July 1939.
- 16 See R. Sertoli Salis, "La definizione del concetto giuridico di razza", *La Difesa della Razza*, III, 5 April 1940, pp. 36-9; and G. Lampis, "La tutela della razza nel Libro I del Nuovo Codice Civile", *Razza e Civiltà*, I (March, 1940), pp. 69-81.
- 17 *ONMI dalla sua fondazione*, p. 144; and the Law of 1 December 1966, n. 1081, published in *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 21 December 1966.



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**B. *\*Archivio del Comune di Roma (Via Merulina, 123)***

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\* (These sources do not belong to a formal archive. The department of social services in Rome granted me permission to examine their own records where I found fragments of ONMI's lost archive.)

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\* (This building is the former Holy Saint Foundling Hospital in Rome which has been converted into a branch of provincial social services. The ONMI documents do not belong to a formal repository and are in great disorder. I have adhered to the classifications as they appear on records.)

**D. *\*Archivio di Stato di Alessandria***

Gabinetto della Prefettura

Questura

\* (The documents from the Alessandria archive lack a catalogue which is now being compiled. Only 100 of the collection's 500 boxes of files from the fascist period have been reordered and numbered thus far. My classification is subject to change.)

**E. Archivio di Stato di Ferrara**

Gabinetto della Prefettura

**F. Archivio di Stato di Milano**

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Categoria 12 (ONMI)

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**G. \*Archivio di Stato di Novara**

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\* (The Novara holdings are without an updated index and file code. Some files which I have cited are listed as *carte da ordinare* and will eventually be given new numbers. My classification is subject to change.)

**H. Archivio di Stato di Torino**

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**I. \*Archivio di Stato di Vercelli**

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\* (The fascist archives in Vercelli are now being reordered and moved to new buildings. Some of the files in the holdings of the prefecture have already been given new numbers, but there is as yet no table of equivalence. In my references I have cited both the new classification where such exists and the original number which appears in parentheses: such as *mazzo* 71 (86). My classification is subject to



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