Introduction

Gender and work in 20th Century Italy: New approaches

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1. Contributions to scholarship and overall questions

Since the emergence of women's history as a field in the 1970s, and gender history in the 1990s, the issue of work has been a central theme, and the intersection of gender relations and identities with experiences of work and its societal organisation continues to produce vibrant scholarship. Over the years, key strands within historical scholarship on gender and work have included: women workers' experiences of work; discrimination in legislation and on labour market; domestic and informal work, home economies; women, class struggle and the labour movement; masculinities and work identities and experiences (Boris, 1994; Sarti, 2006; Badino, 2008; Bracke, 2019; Betti, 2019; Pescarolo, 2019).

Originally, a feminist impulse behind this scholarship meant that the focus often lay with rendering women workers' experiences and actions visible, uncovering the extent, variety and socio-economic impact of women's working lives. Uncovering (women's) experiences that were long silenced in scholarship remains a key aim of gender history, and it is tackled within this special issue in a number of contexts: gendered precarious work, as in the case of Eloisa Betti's essay; Isabel Crowhurst's exploration of tax imaginaries and sex workers; Alessandra Gissi's investigation of female labour migration in the 1960s and the 1970s; Carla Mereu Keating research on the invisibility of women workers in Italian cinema, and Andrea Sangiovanni's article on the gendered imaginary of work in Italian media since the Second World War.

However, such an 'additive' approach, denouncing the silencing of women's experiences and adding these to wider narratives of history, was deeply challenged in the late 1980s, notably in Joan Wallach Scott's publications, starting with her 1986 article 'Gender: a useful category of historical analysis' (Scott, 1986). Drawing on poststructuralism, Scott proposed to view gender as a system of power signified primarily through language and the symbolic realm. As she

famously proposed, gender is 'a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes,' as well as 'a primary way of signifying relationships of power,' (p. 1067). Women, men, the social roles they enact, and the attributes associated with them are all socially constructed, primarily through language. Such an approach entailed a warning against the essentialisation of gendered identities in the social world: that is to say, the fact that a woman is biologically a woman does not explain her discrimination on the labour market. Instead, it is the social and discursive constructions of 'male' and 'female' and their relationships that remain to be explained, with, for example, the organisation of work contributing to such constructions and relationships, through everyday practices and encounters. While several feminist thinkers and historians critiqued such an approach at the time and have done so since earing, among other things, that it neglected the material basis of women's and men's social roles (among others Hoff, 1994), the systemic and structural approach to gender continues to inform the methods and research agendas of gender history. It was strengthened, further, by Judith Butler's articulation of gender as a system of performativity in the early 1990s, which influenced approaches to feminism, queerness, and sex across the social sciences (Butler, 1990). While these intellectual and conceptual developments were situated in the US, European historians and feminists, too, came to be influenced by the rise of gender as a paradigm. If in countries such as Italy or France gender history never completely replaced 'women's history' as an area of study, the two are situated in an often-productive tension. As gender history continues to converse with wider gender studies, the former has an important role to play vis-à-vis the latter: specifically, its illumination of the constantly shifting mechanisms of gender as a relationship of power allows to question any essentialist, fixed understanding of gender identities and roles (Meyerowitz, 2008).

As with all activist-inspired scholarship, it has been pointed out that 'adding women to the mix' is a valuable intellectual agenda but a limited one. The aim of gender history as intersecting with labour history is, in addition to uncovering neglected stories, to question established concepts, definitions and periodisation, by mapping the range of gendered experiences and gender-driven socio-economic developments. This includes unsettling the very definitions of work, and crucially, undoing the dichotomies of private/public spheres and waged/unwaged labour on which much traditional labour history and activism was built (Sarti, Bellavitis, Martini, 2018). Gendered histories have aimed to propose new, more encompassing, and more historically precise definitions of work including revised periodisations and the consideration of different actors, practices and places of work. For instance, gender historians have offered

significant reinterpretations of the 18th -19th Century industrial revolution, understanding it as being preceded by a home-based, 'industrious' revolution in which women played a significant role (De Vries, 1994; Shepard, 2015). They have also, for instance, reconfigured the history of 20th Century international labour standards from the viewpoint of women's precarious work (Boris, Fish, 2014).

Since the 2000s, the feminist turn, both in activism and scholarship, towards intersectionality has injected gender and labour history with critical insights and novel approaches: further breaking down the categories of 'woman', 'man' and 'worker', intersectional approaches to the question of work have systematically pointed at the intricate framing of workers' relationships and experiences. This framing is shaped in complex ways by intersecting inequalities and oppressions rooted in class, gender, race, ability, and sexuality (Duffy, 2007). In doing so they have fundamentally reframed the history of capitalism, imperialism and slavery. There is an opportunity, not yet fully grasped by more traditional labour-history approaches, to engage with and deepen notions of intersectionality, a concept which allows to reinterpret class, a socio-economic relationship and system of power and oppression, in relation to gender, and therefore to bring social class back fully into the picture of gender studies.

The premise of this special issue is that Italian 20th Century history has an important story to tell about how gender frames the conditions, experiences, and discourses of work, and how it structures economic change and class conflict. The Italian story both illustrates wider European developments and highlights local specificities. In particular, two research areas emerge from our understanding of the field, which may illustrate the relevance of Italian analysis to wider (West) European developments in this period: the post-World War Two economic boom, and mid-to late-20th century migration. While Italy's 'economic miracle' of 1958-1964 formed part of a much wider and unprecedented economic recovery across Western Europe, in Italy the rise in productivity was arguably more pronounced than it was elsewhere in Western Europe, and the cultural changes resulting from the boom unfolded more rapidly and were more disruptive (Crainz, 1996). At the same time, economic progress was strongly marked by regional and sector-based differentiation and uneven development. As demonstrated by Eloisa Betti's contribution, it was also deeply framed by gender: in 1950s and 1960s Italy, women's work, both in the factory and at home was characterised by precarity and exploitation — a reminder of the limits of the 'economic miracle', and that the institutions and structures that generate precarious work and insecurity are not an invention of neoliberalism.

The contributions to this special issue mostly focus on the mid-20th century (1930s to 1970s), a phase marked by dramatic ruptures including the consolidation of Fascism, War, the defeat of Fascism, and the establishment of the Republic. As emerges from the articles, these ruptures occurred alongside continuities, particularly striking in the realm of gender and work, where gender norms and prejudices persisted almost unchanged between the Fascist era and the post-1945 period. The endurance of notions of femininity emphasising domesticity, and of understandings of masculinity centred on virility and the male breadwinner model, had a significant impact on women's access to and standing in the labour market, as well as on their rights. We propose that the mid-20th century particularly eloquently reveals the centrality of gender to labour history, by demonstrating this enduring quality, despite dramatic political changes and this in all aspects of the social organisation of labour. Taken together, the articles demonstrate the relative constancy with which gender operates in creating power relations and inequalities throughout a phase of otherwise exceptional political and socio-cultural change.

We propose that Italy illuminates in specific ways the relative constancy of gender hierarchies in the realm of labour, in a national context that was particularly affected by dramatic political changes. The key questions, then, underpinning this special issue can be summed up as follows: how did gender frame experiences of work? How did notions of femininity and masculinity inform public and political debates on work, work regulation, and social conflict? How did gender structure the access to work, conditions and pay? How did implicitly or explicitly gendered concepts shape definitions of what is and is not work, and hierarchical perceptions on value? How important were representations and discourses of masculinity and femininity in more widely shaping the social meaning of work? How did gender inform work-based identities and solidarities? And how did it contribute to mobilising collective identities as well as shaping divisions within labour movements? In what follows, we situate the special issue articles in relation to these questions, specifically by introducing the key three themes linking the articles together: work, gender, and migration; gendering the history of the post-war economic boom; and cultural representations of women's work.

2. The articles: themes and methods

In the scholarship on post-1945 migration, both labour and postcolonial migration, Italy was long interpreted as atypical, and distinct from nations more often held as paradigmatic to the West European experience such as France and Britain. Italy in this period was characterised by

very high levels of emigration and, as it was long argued, low levels of immigration, both from within and outside Europe. Social-science studies, too, with a contemporary focus on immigration to Italy have neglected to investigate extra-European immigration prior to 1980, long held wrongly as the moment Italy became a receiving country of labour migrants. The historiographic neglect of early post-war non-European migration to Italy can be interpreted as a reflection of the silence in Italian society and in scholarship around Italy's post-1945 status as a post-colonial nation (Mellino, 2006; Deplano, 2018). It contrasts with the thriving scholarship on 19th and 20th Century Italian emigration, including women emigrants (Friedman-Kasaba, 1996; Bianchi, 2001; Gabaccia, 1988). Recent publications have redressed this (Colucci, 2016; Andall, 2008; Marchetti, Squeglia, 2008) but much research remains to be conducted on the variety of migratory experiences during this period, including distinct gender patterns, and the cultural and socio-economic impacts of this earlier immigration.

This special issue draws attention to labour immigration going back to the 1960s. Gender emerges as a useful tool for uncovering such earlier immigration: Alessandra Gissi's article analyses the long-neglected phenomenon of immigrant women's domestic labour in the 1960s-70s, to point at the limits of the welfare state and the social contract, typically seen as characteristic of this period. It thus makes a critical contribution to histories of the post-war welfare state, and to the question of who was endowed with or excluded from social citizenship. The *feminisation of migration* has been high on the scholarly agenda over the past twenty years. However, as pointed out by Donna Gabaccia and Katherine Donato, the term feminisation might conceal as much as it reveals, as it suggests the growing numerical or social significance of women's share of migration over time. Migration by women has always, they assert, been as significant as male migration, and what is a recent, late 20th Century phenomenon, is the 'discovery' of female migrants and gendered distinctions in statistics and scholarly and public discourse on migration (Donato, Gabaccia, 2015). Rejecting the earlier focus in historical migration scholarship on young, single male labour migrants, scholars such as Gabaccia have turned their attention to women as active migrants: individuals with agency making their own migratory choices, whether single or as part of a family, and whether motivated by economic motives, family reunion, or personal safety. Recently, social-science scholarship has offered original frameworks for the analysis of the gendered nature of work and immigration in contemporary Italy. Sabina Marchetti has done this by focusing on the paradigmatic case of domestic workers, specifically women originating from Central and Eastern Europe, engaged in elderly and childcare primarily (Marchetti, Salih, 2017; Marchetti, Cherubini, Garofalo

Geymonat, 2021). In this special issue, Gissi draws on Marchetti's framework in order to analyse how notions on domestic work are constructed and understood through its feminization, gendering and racialization, in a context where this work is associated with female migrants.

Another research area, and second theme in this special issue, where gender crucially allows us to unseat established historical concepts, is in the interpretation of the *post-war economic boom*. In France referred to as the *trente glorieuses*, the period between 1945-1975 has been viewed for Western Europe as a whole through the prism of successful economic reconstruction and industrial-infrastructural development, leading to new affluence for many in society. In Italy, the term 'economic miracle' usually denoted the shorter period of unprecedented growth and radical cultural change, 1958-1964 (Crainz, 1996). In most accounts, post-war growth is accompanied by the creation of welfare systems dramatically improving ordinary people's social security in terms of access to and stability of work, income, housing, healthcare, and education. Social and political scientists have understood this period as creating a modern social contract and social citizenship. In recent years, an important debate has unfolded in European and Italian scholarship, problematising this picture of universal wellbeing and social protection. Several social groups existed in the margins or outside of this social contract, and in Italy particularly the discrepancies were strong and became entrenched in geographical terms and between economic sectors. The 'miracle' and Italy's apparently unprecedented industrial productivity was, as has emerged from recent scholarship, built partly on undeclared labour by minors and 'housewives' in the context of family businesses (Badino, 2008; Pescarolo, 2019).

Specifically, piece-work – that is to say, production or services normally defined as productive labour but performed in the home primarily by women, for instance small-scale textile production and food processing – turns out to have been pivotal to Italy's economic miracle (Betti, 2019). Long unregulated and often unpaid or underpaid, it has formed the focus of social struggles by women, while often being by male trade union leaderships and scholars alike. Betti's contribution to this special issue uses the notion of labour precariousness to redress our understanding of the economic miracle: women's work during this period, whether in formal workplaces or in the home as piece-work, or waged or unwaged care work, was overwhelmingly precarious. In her analysis, work instability and exploitation emerge as more characteristic of 'economic miracle' than the well-known image of the male worker with a stable career and social safety net. Indeed, Sangiovanni shows how cultural representations of work in Italy touched upon female labour only marginally, and when they did, such artefacts

were mostly ignored by mainstream distribution and public. Similarly, as Gissi demonstrates, female labour migration during the 1960s and 1970s remained invisible because it was linked to the sphere of domestic work.

Feminist scholarship on affective labour helps us to unsettle definitions of labour as well as established understandings of those performing it and how and where it is performed (Dowling, 2007). Numerous forms of work sit in a liminal space between what is usually considered productive labour and social forms of interaction that involve the body, emotions, and intimacy. Because of this hybrid position, sex work is seldom acknowledged in labour market data, but its analysis can help reframe questions about the dynamic between market relationship and reproductive labour (Wolkowitz, Cohen, Sanders, 2013). The social position of sex workers, the conditions of sex work, and the public and political debates on prostitution in post-war Italy have been analysed in work by scholars such as Nicola Mai (2018). However, thus far, the fiscal regulation of sex work has remained under-examined. As discussed by Isabel Crowhurst in her contribution, this is a crucial aspect to understand the stigmatisation of prostitution and sex workers. Taxes, Crowhurst explains, are not neutral. 'Tax imaginaries', a concept alluding to shared imaginaries about taxes and taxpayers, and the ambivalent and gendered language used by legal experts and media when discussing fiscal policies and prostitution, have played a significant role in reinforcing prejudices on sex workers and their social and political exclusion.

Thirdly and finally, the special issue offers historical insight into the *cultural representations* of work with the article by Andrea Sangiovanni on cinematic and TV representations of work and their influence on meanings and ideas of work. The focus is on the film industry, which was key in shaping Italian culture and national self-understanding following 1945. Public discourses and cultural representations of work both inform and reflect the value a society attaches to work and how it defines good, productive work. Cinema, understood in this period as a quintessentially 'modern' art form, industry, and form of leisure, offers us a mirror of how Italian society saw itself or wished to see itself at a time of turbulent change, not least in work experiences and conditions. Films reflect the existing social norms and discourses with regard to work activities, while they also function as a space for societal critique and the questioning of existing social and gender norms. When, amidst the rise of industrial conflict in the late 1960s, the media increased their attention to the world of labour and its protests, work was predominantly depicted as a masculine activity. With few exceptions, the main characters in the numerous films produced in the 1960s and 1970s that focused on work were men. This

tendency was particularly evident in the context of manual industrial work, which had long been central to masculine identity.

Cinema and television also reinforced traditional gender norms, portraying working men as typically domineering and jealous husbands, while women were mostly depicted as submissive wives and, if working, as apolitical labourers. Films like the *Working class Goes to Heaven* by Elio Petri (1971) started deconstructing male identity. The main character, Lulù Massa, rebels against the Stakhanov-like work ethics that had long been central to macho images of industrial labour. Moreover, as the movie progresses, he develops mental issues, a dimension rarely associated with male characters, especially those engaged in manual labour, in cinematic representations. De-industrialisation since the late 1970s, the surge in male unemployment, the rise of precarious labour, and the expansion of the female-dominated tertiary sector have collectively exerted a significant impact on men's standing in the labour market and perceptions of masculinity. As discussed by Sangiovanni in the concluding part of his article focusing on the 21st Century, movies reflected these changes, contributing to a redefinition of both femininity and masculinity.

Cinema as an industry is tackled in the contribution by Carla Mereu Keating, who uncovers the experiences of women workers in film studios during the Fascist era and wartime years. Mereu Keating analyses the careers of the numerous women who worked off screen or, as she puts it, in a 'behind the scenes capacity' within the Italian film industry between 1930 and 1944. Conventional histories of Italian cinema have consistently ignored their contribution, in part because it has left little historical traces or was hidden behind collective practices or wrongly attributed to men. Keating discusses the gendered spaces of labour within the film industry, highlighting the crucial role these women played, and the numerous obstacles they confronted in gaining recognition for their work and value.Her article demonstrates that paying attention to gender in the study of work goes beyond creating a space for women alongside a narrative centred on me, but implies also rethinking the epistemologies and methodologies with which we approach archives.

In shedding new light on these scholarly debates, this collection demonstrates the value of employing a range of approaches and invoking diverse sources. The articles show the depth and nuance that can be achieved by combining methods and frameworks ranging from spatial analysis (Mereu Keating); social reproduction theory that breaks down the dichotomy between productive and unproductive labour and formal and informal economies (Gissi and Betti);

feminist theories of effective labour (Crowhurst); and media analysis (Sangiovanni). Most articles employ archives by trade unions, employers' organisations, businesses, and government papers, and several contributions use personal testimony and oral history (Betti, Keating, Gissi). The latter sources offer unique insight into personal experiences of work and work identities, and are well-established in gender history. Sangiovanni's use of cinema and TV programmes has been key to his analysis of visual media representations. Crowhurst's analysis of blog posts and commentaries published online by legal and fiscal professionals was important to reconstruct debates on fiscal policies and prostitution. Perhaps even more importantly, her choice of sources served to underscore the gendered language and degrading images prevalent on these websites, contributing to the stigmatisation of sex work. Bringing a range of sources together, revealing the diversity of the contexts, social meanings, and actors of work, is important not only in an empirical sense. Theoretically, it offers an opportunity to apply and explore one of the key principles of 1970s grassroots feminism in Italy: *partire da se'*. While 'starting from oneself', or critically and systematically dissecting inequality and alienation but also desire and joy in one's everyday life, allowed activists to question the established principles of left politics which had shaped them, including definitions of work, the private/public boundary, and the very contours of the political (Bracke, 2014), it may provide us with an anchor and a point of departure for rethinking both individual experiences and social meanings of work.

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