

Review

Carol F. Helstosky

Garlic and Oil. Food and Politics in Italy

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It is widely recognized that food represents a key issue for the identity of Italy, and that today Italian food habits enjoy global popularity as both desirable and varied. In this book, the historian Carol Helstosky tries to analyse some aspects of how Italian food habits have been constructed since the unification of the country in 1861 until the 1960s, and especially how food politics and state interventions influenced the possibilities of the development of these food habits.

Thus, this research, based on Helstosky's doctoral thesis of 1996, and in parts already presented in journals such as *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* and *Food and Foodways*, represents an important contribution to our understanding of the history of Italy through the lens of a history of consumerism and of the new field of research known as *food studies*. The book aims to comprehend how the now worldwide specificities of Italian food habits are rooted in the historical interrelation between structural and economic conditions, state intervention and the cultural and symbolic dimension.

The premise of the author is that what we today know as «Italian cuisine» is a historical creation produced by different factors. While «*Mediterranean diet was the unfortunate consequence of environment*», this book argues that politics shaped Italian diet and that Italian food represented a national resource to be managed by politics through state intervention (p. 2). The data used by Helstosky are various: quantitative data, such as economic and demographic research; official documents from parliament and from government; heterogeneous publications such as cookbooks, cuisine guides, and cooking magazines.

The book is divided into five chapters, and an epilogue which addresses some trajectories of Italian food in the present. The first chapter deals with the period of unification of the country, from 1861 up to the First World War. At the moment of unification Italy was a very heterogeneous country, with many differences between north and south, both economic and culinary. In general, the country was poor, based on subsistence farming and a limited industrial infrastructure. Malnutrition, due to the scarcity of food and monotonous diet, was the main food problem throughout the country. Italian food habits, despite being differentiated among regions, were characterised by this scarcity of food (p. 21), and it was in this situation that experts' discourses and parliamentary inquiries stressed the need for an improvement in the national diet. Nevertheless, the

discourses of experts and authorities concerning what people should eat mainly remained theoretical due to the absence of direct state intervention with food issues. Indeed, in this period liberalism characterised the state's management of food questions. However, this period was characterised by the beginnings of the formation of an Italian national cuisine, represented by Pellegrino Artusi's famous book, *The Science of Cooking and the Art of Eating Well* (1891), which in any case remained confined to the small middle class population.

Chapter 2 deals with the period from World War I until the coming of the fascist regime. The War deeply influenced food politics in Italy. Indeed, the management of war supplies imposed a shift from a *laissez-faire* attitude towards a state coordination of food production, distribution and consumption. The state food policy was characterized during this period by the institution of fixed prices for flour and bread, and by an export ban on food produced in the country. This state control culminated in 1917 with the institution of a *General Commissariat for Food Consumption*. Furthermore, external subsidies from Italy's allies played a role in improving the quantity of food available, and this additional support also contributed at the end of the war to increasing the purchase of non-nutritious items, at least in urban centres such as Milan. In general, during wartime standards of living increased and, the author argues, also the consumer expectation of food supply grew. But the end of subsidies and fixed prices in the after-war period coincided with a decline in the quantity and quality of food available, and this was one of the reasons for the riots in the period 1920-1922. The war, and the consequent state control of food supply, produced a change in food habits, but postwar liberal regimes, which had to deal with an economy marked by strong inflation, were not able to satisfy the demand for greater food consumption.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the fascist period. Fascism revolutionized the political management of food consumption, adopting an active and direct control over food supply and consumption. The author distinguishes between two different periods in fascist food policies. During a first period from 1922 up to 1935 the regime guaranteed a more or less adequate standard of living and a compromise between food scarcity and general availability thanks to a discouragement of food export and an ideological propaganda concerning consumption, accorded with the restriction imposed by the situation. In this phase, food represented a political tool to maintain consensus and the regime reversed the need of a moderate consumption for their political aims (p. 64). The second period (1935-1945) coincides with the decline of the popularity of the regime and also with the inadequacy of the fascist food policy to maintain the precarious equilibrium between increasing austerity and autarchy and ideological propaganda. Consequently, this period was marked by severe privations and, particularly during the Second World War, with a real struggle to survive everyday life for most Italians.

Despite these different periods, fascist policy was characterized throughout its existence by two parallel strategies. On the one hand, the regime limited the amount and the quality of food through a severe control of

food exportations and the discouragement of importations of non-Italian food; this policy was achieved also through authoritarian campaigns against retailers and the suppression of any form of social conflict. On the other hand, propaganda and expert discourses worked in strong accordance with the regime in order to «create new ways of thinking about food» (p. 65). Indeed, fascism not only used food in order to build an Italian national identity useful to the regime's stability, but it also managed to stimulate a rich food literature aimed at educating consumers to «work within the limits set by the drive toward self-sufficiency, while seeking to satisfy their own desires as well as the dictates of regional and class identities» (p. 81). In short, in the fascist period scarcity and austerity remained at least the same as previous periods, but they were elevated to a national food ethic based on moderate consumption habits.

Nevertheless, fascist food policy failed to provide enough food for the Italian population, mainly because it aimed more to affirm a strict regime of autarchy than to implement a further development of national agricultural production. However, it had great impact on food habits and the author maintains that it contributed to transforming the necessity of austerity into «attributes of *italianità*», and to developing «pride in regional cooking» which «became the foundation of Italian cooking in the 1920s and 1930s» (p. 125).

The years of the Second World War were very dramatic, as were those first years after the war. However, the help of Italian allies and the development of an economy more integrated with international commerce, culminating in 1957 with joining the European Economic Community, contributed to radically improving food supply and living standards. While Italy was moving from being an essentially agricultural country to an industrialised one, for the first time consumers had the freedom to choose what they wanted to eat. This modernization was not characterised by a drastic change in food habits, and food consumption changed very little in terms of the kinds of food consumed. Rather, Italians consumed more of the food they consumed prior to this period of abundance, namely more meat and fresh vegetables and fruit (p. 127). Whilst the Americanization of food did not consistently affect Italian food habits, eating outside the home became a more widespread habit among the population and the major modernization processes of food supply were represented by the development of a flourishing food industry with companies such as Barilla, Buitoni and Ferrero (p.143).

In short, the modernization and the abundance of the post war period did not transform Italian food habits. Rather, these habits mainly represented an adaptation of practices and behaviours which had their own foundation in the way Italian food policies managed food scarcity during the decades preceding the post war years. Thus, and this is the main thesis of the book, today's Italian food culture represents the rather static development of the contradictory political management of the natural and structural limits of the Italian food supply.

While the book briefly concludes with some observations about current food trends in Italy, considering the development of McDonald restaurants, the Slowfood movement and the protest against GMO food, the

book's major contribution is clearly on the history of food politics, especially concerning the period which ends with the Second World War.

Whilst the analysis of state food policies is both well done and very well documented, the consideration of changing *real* consumer habits could be considered the major weakness of this book, mainly because the sources for the analysis are overwhelmingly represented by official and institutional data. To this regard, it seems useful to note that the field of social history in Italy can usefully profit from some studies based on the oral histories of common people, studies not considered in this book, which in any case is mainly a history of state intervention. The work of Nuto Revelli, for example, *Il mondo dei Vinti* (1977), based on 270 interviews (only 85 presented in the book), presenting the ordinary life of farmers and workers between the end of the eighteenth century and the «economic boom» years, could represent a useful source for a direct description of the real food habits of common people. In Revelli's book, not only are the real food habits of Italian people presented, but also the farmers' and consumers' perceptions of the impact of these state policies which are so well addressed in Helstosky's book from a predominantly institutional and public perspective.

However, *Garlic and Oil* does represent an important historical reconstruction of the relation between state policies and food consumption patterns, useful for historians of consumption as well as for historians in general, especially for those involved with the fascist period, which is to some degree reframed from the perspective of food consumption. The book is also helpful for scholars of consumption, especially for those involved with contemporary food culture, representing an important historical framework of the development of food consumption in Italy, particularly for the attention paid to the construction of public and expert discourse about food in Italy.